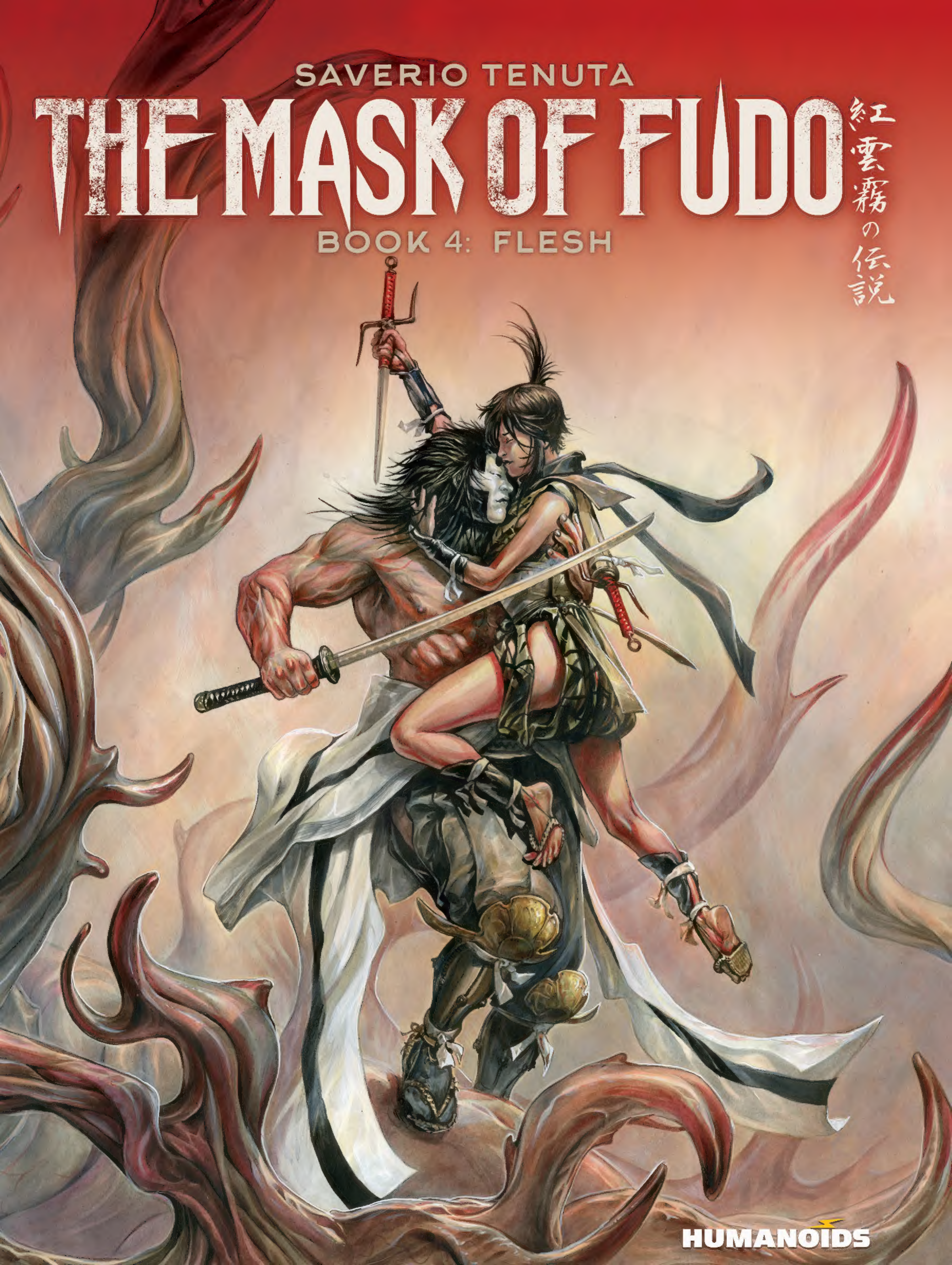
SAVERIO TENUTA

THE MASK OF FUDO

紅雲霧の伝説

BOOK 4: FLESH



HUMANOIDS

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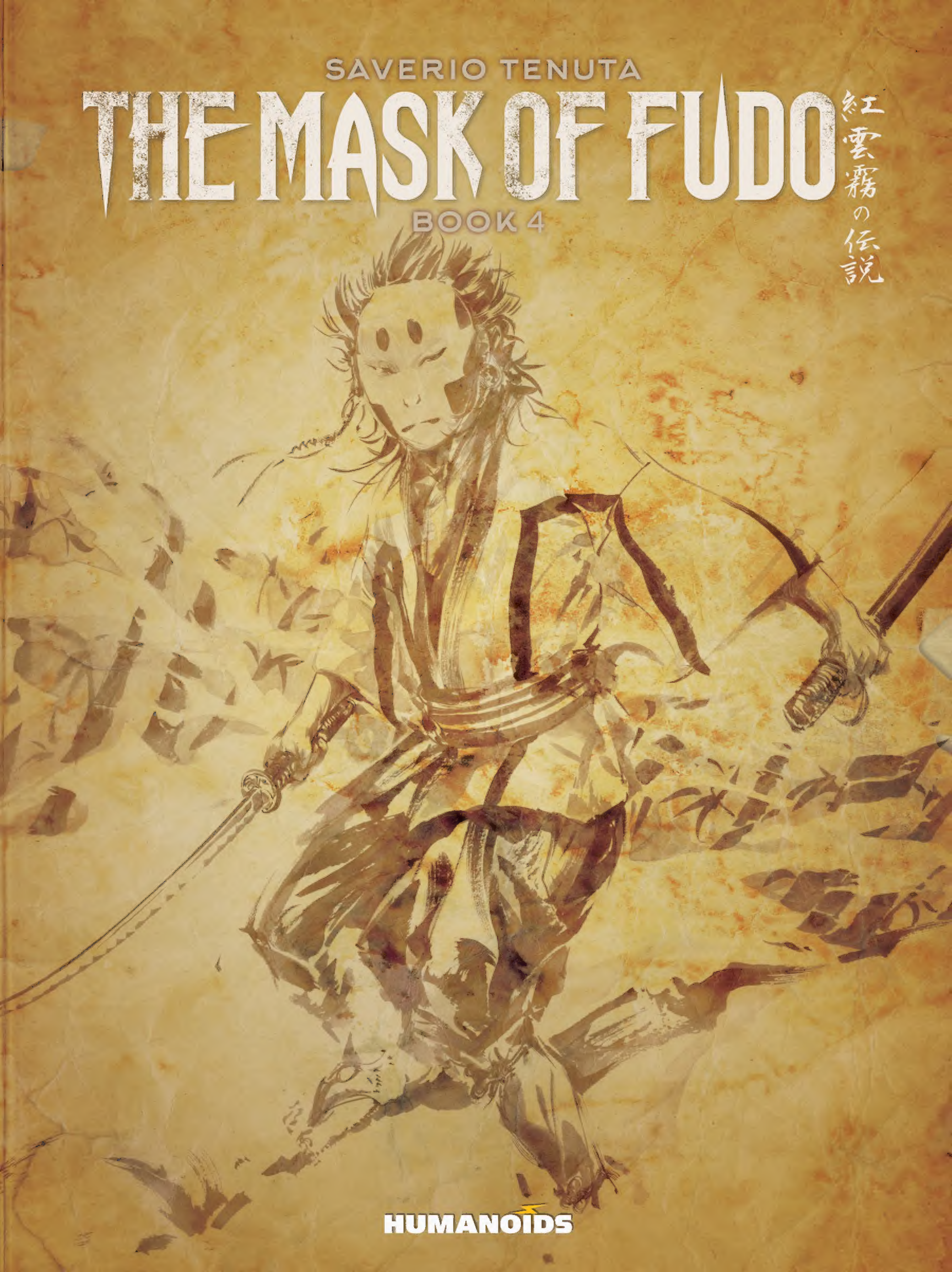

HUMANOIDS

紅雲霧の伝説

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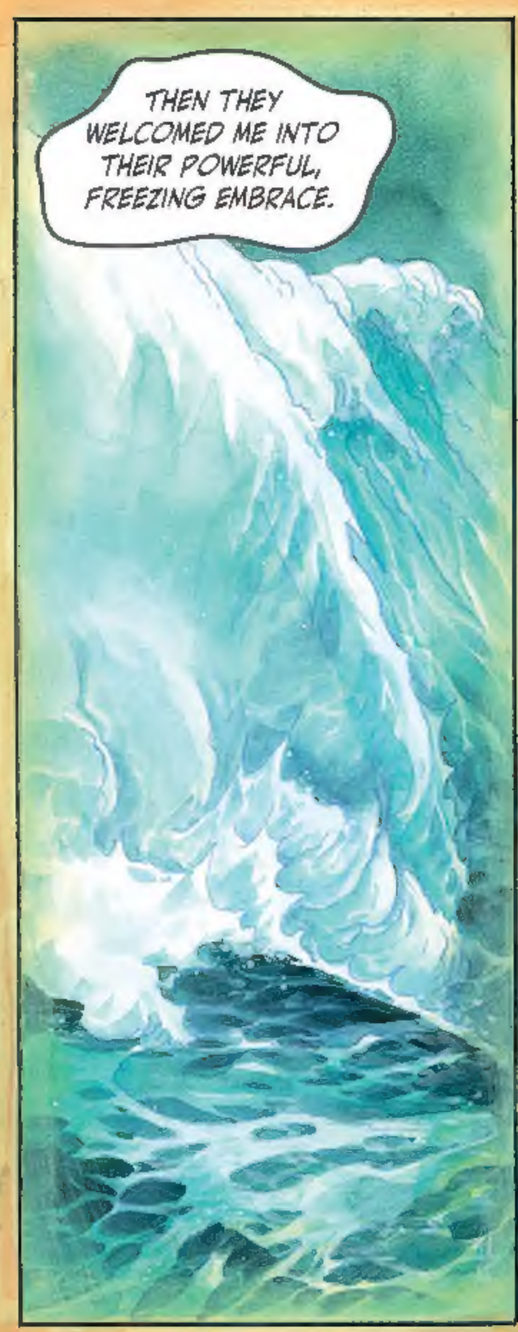
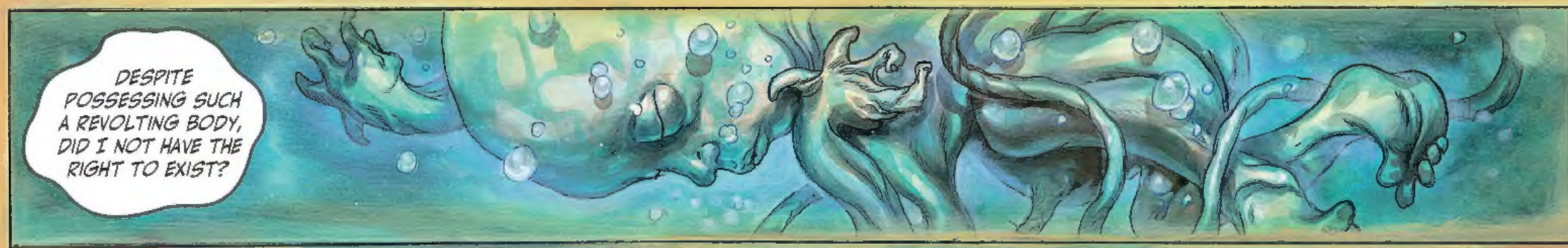
I WAS BORN AT THE DAWN OF TIME, FROM THE LOVE BETWEEN MY MOTHER AND MY FATHER.

ONLY THE WAVES WERE THERE TO ROCK ME...


THEN THEY WELCOMED ME INTO THEIR POWERFUL, FREEZING EMBRACE.

I EXPERIENCED THE CALMNESS OF THE SEA. THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.


DESPITE POSSESSING SUCH A REVOLTING BODY, DID I NOT HAVE THE RIGHT TO EXIST?

I DRIFTED ENDLESSLY IN SEARCH OF PURPOSE...AND, EVENTUALLY, I FOUND IT.
A VILLAGE... JUST A FEW MODEST HUTS ON THE SEASHORE.

BUT I COULDN'T OFFER MY HELP, AS I HAD NO BONES.

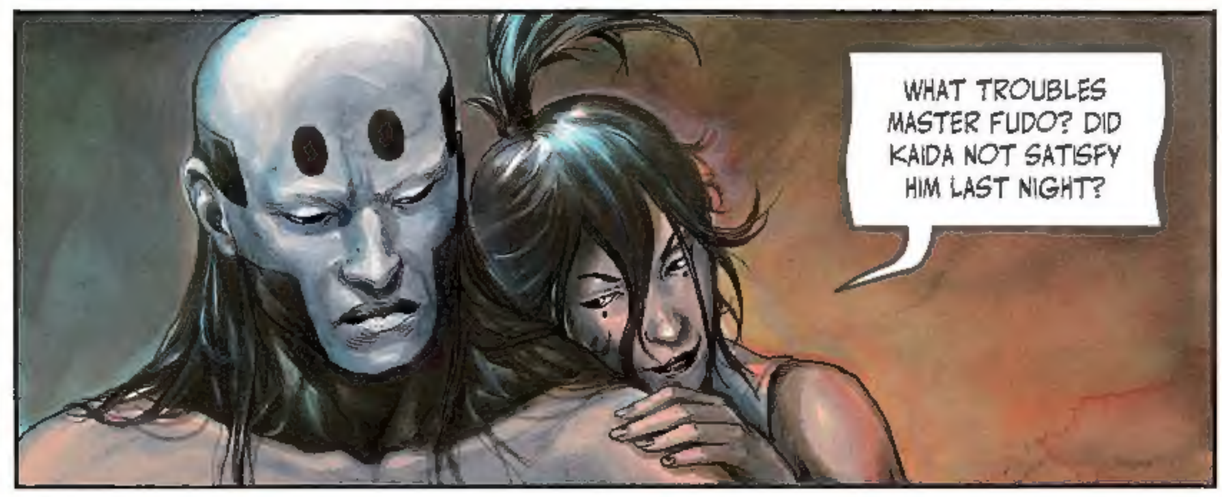
I COULDN'T OFFER MY WARMTH, AS I HAD NEVER RECEIVED ANY.

I COULD ONLY OFFER ONE THING.

THEY UNDERSTOOD MY DEED.

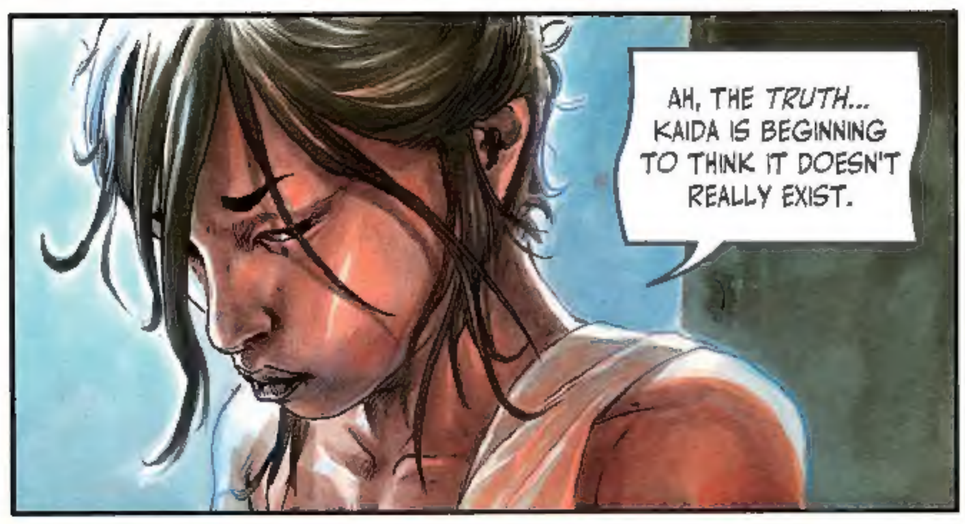
THE NOISE LASTED A LONG TIME.
THE ENTIRE VILLAGE CELEBRATED AND DRANK.
THE VILLAGERS NOW HAD ENOUGH FOOD TO LIVE WORRY FREE.
TO THANK ME FOR MY FISH, THEY WORSHIPED ME. THEY BECAME MY FRAME, THE BONES I HAD BEEN DENIED.
THEY BECAME THE ARMS OF THE ONE THEY CALLED THE KAMI WITH NO BONES...
...THE LEECH GOD...
...HIRUKO.

TRY AS I MIGHT TO HATE YOU FOR MY SISTER'S DEATH... I CANNOT.


WHAT TROUBLES MASTER FUDO? DID KAIDA NOT SATISFY HIM LAST NIGHT?

IT FEELS GOOD TO BE TOGTHER AGAIN, BUT WE BOTH KNOW IT IS MERELY AN ILLUSION, DESTINED TO VANISH WITH THE EXACTION OF MY REVENGE.
THE SHOGUN'S NUPTIALS TAKE PLACE AT DAWN, AND THE SUN IS ABOUT TO RISE.

IF YOU LOVE ME AS MUCH AS YOU CLAIM TO, I NEED TO KNOW YOUR TRUE INTENTIONS.


AH, THE *TRUTH*... KAIDA IS BEGINNING TO THINK IT DOESN'T REALLY EXIST.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR SELF-INFLICTED WOUND? I SUPPOSE *THAT* DOESN'T EXIST, EITHER?

IT SHOULD HAVE KILLED YOU, YET THE PAIN SEEMS TO HAVE SUBSIDED OVERNIGHT.

I'M BEGINNING TO DOUBT YOU ARE EVEN HUMAN.

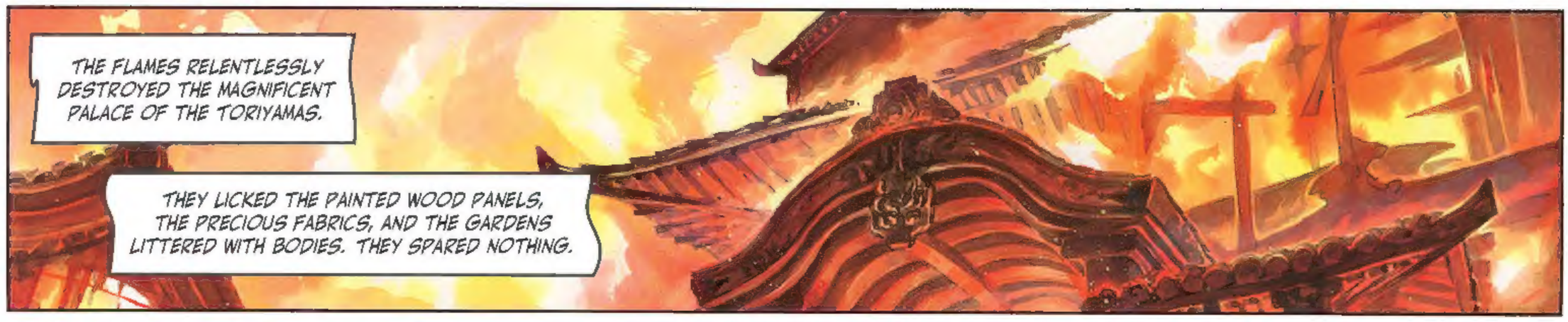
KAIDA...*IS* HUMAN, AND YET NOT. SHE HERSELF NO LONGER KNOWS. PERHAPS SHE IS A LITTLE LIKE SHINNOSUKE *AND* MASTER FUDO.

THE ONLY THING KAIDA IS SURE OF IS THAT SHE MUST FOLLOW THE MASK SO THAT THE PROPHECY MAY BE FULFILLED.
YOU KNEW THE TRUTH ABOUT MY MOTHER. YOU'VE ALWAYS KNOWN MORE THAN SHE HAS ABOUT PROPHECY.

YES, AND KAIDA IS SAD... BECAUSE SHINNOSUKE IS GOING TO ENDURE MORE SUFFERING.
A PAIN THAT WILL TORTURE HIM FOREVER.

WORSE THAN THE ONE HE FELT DURING THE FIRE IN THE TORIYAMA HOME...

...AND THE ONE THAT BURNED OVER THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED.


THE FLAMES RELENTLESSLY DESTROYED THE MAGNIFICENT PALACE OF THE TORIYAMAS.
THEY LICKED THE PAINTED WOOD PANELS, THE PRECIOUS FABRICS, AND THE GARDENS LITTERED WITH BODIES. THEY SPARED NOTHING.

NOT EVEN THE SOUL OF THE MAN WHO CAME OUT OF THAT HELL ALIVE.

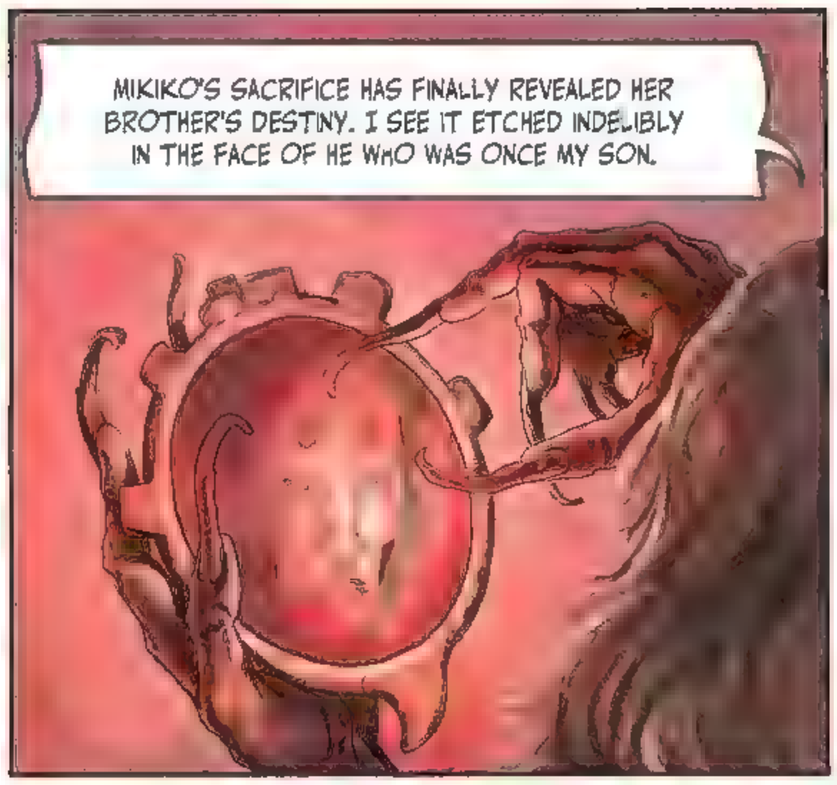
THE FIRE HAD JUST FINISHED CONSUMING MIKIKO'S DEAD BODY, AND AKEMI TORIYAMA WAS STILL ALIVE.

KAIDA HAD MADE HER CHOICE, AWARE OF WHAT IT WOULD COST SHINNOSUKE.

BUT ANOTHER WAS GUILTIER THAN SHE - THE ONE WHO HAD MANIPULATED SHINNOSUKE FROM THE START.

IN FUDO'S HEART, THE FLAMES NOW BURNED, SOVEREIGN, DEMANDING THEIR POUND OF FLESH.
HIS MOTHER NOBU WAS THE NEXT ONE TO BE DEVOURED BY THEM.

THE FRAIL FLOWER HAS BEEN CUT DOWN FOR YOU, MY LORD HIRUKO... YES, IT HAS.

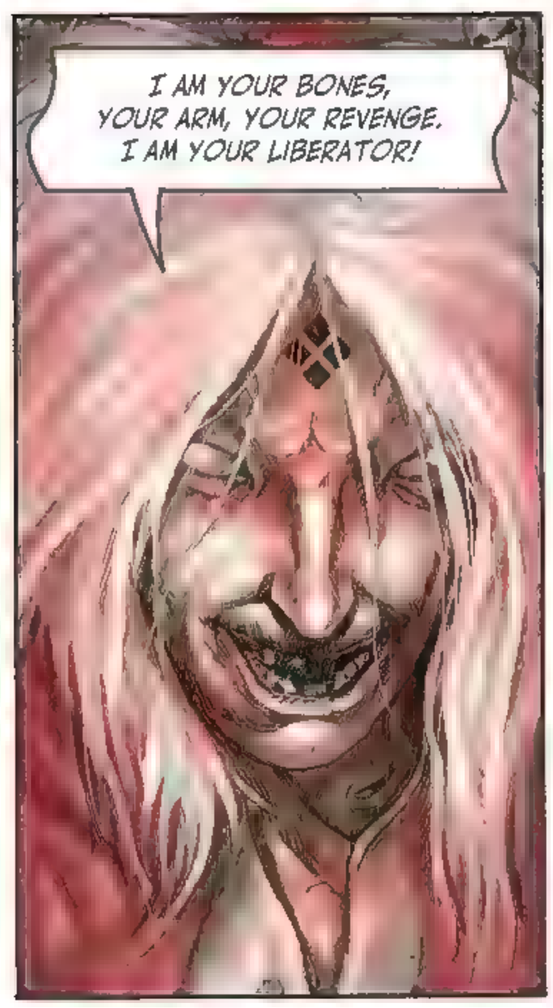

MIKIKO'S SACRIFICE HAS FINALLY REVEALED HER BROTHER'S DESTINY. I SEE IT ETCHED INDELIBLY IN THE FACE OF HE WHO WAS ONCE MY SON.

THE PROTECTOR WITH THE IMMOVABLE FIRE WILL SOON APPEAR AMONG US.

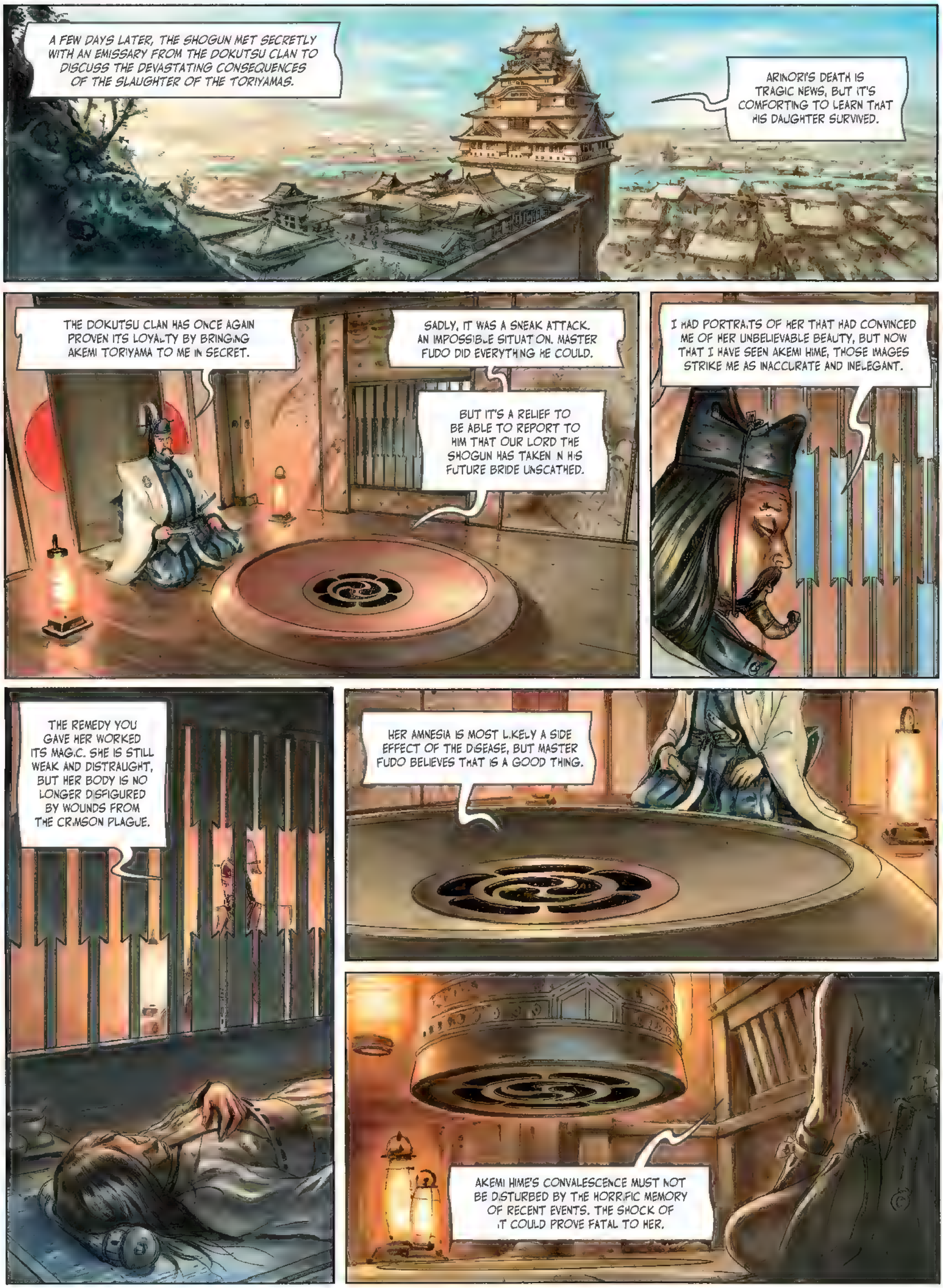
BY YOUR SACRED EYE, I HAVE OPENED A PORTAL INTO THIS WORLD. REALITY IS ALREADY CHANGING.

IT IS PREPARING TO RECEIVE YOU IN THE FLESH, MY LORD HIRUKO.

THE LAST SPARK OF THE HIRUKOTE WAS ABOUT TO CONSUME EVERYTHING, EVEN THE SEA.


I AM YOUR BONES, YOUR ARM, YOUR REVENGE. I AM YOUR LIBERATOR!

THE DARK SMOKE OF THE MIKKYO HAD ENABLED NOBU TO TAKE CONTROL OVER THE DOKUTSU DOJO.

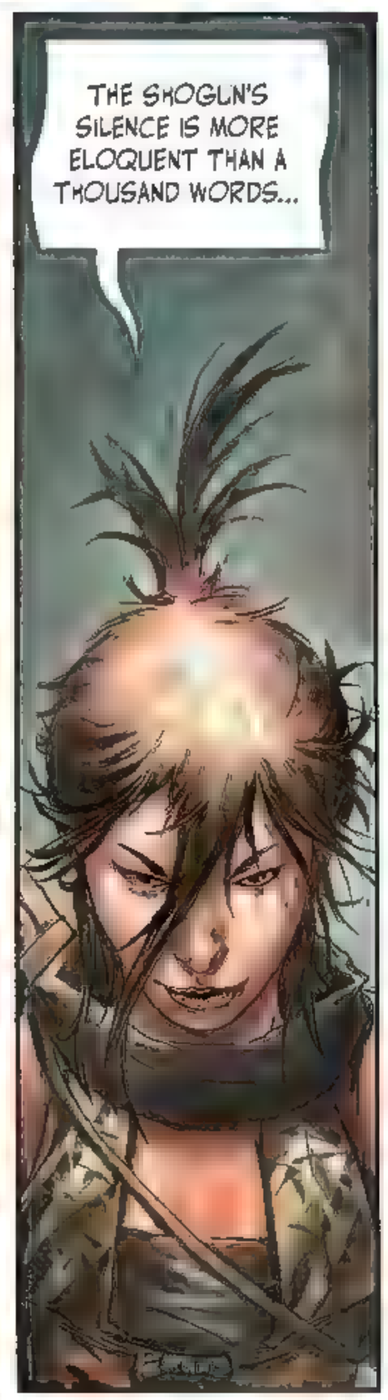

A FEW DAYS LATER, THE SHOGUN MET SECRETLY WITH AN EMISSARY FROM THE DOKUTSU CLAN TO DISCUSS THE DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES OF THE SLAUGHTER OF THE TORIYAMAS.
ARINORI'S DEATH IS TRAGIC NEWS, BUT IT'S COMFORTING TO LEARN THAT HIS DAUGHTER SURVIVED.
THE DOKUTSU CLAN HAS ONCE AGAIN PROVEN ITS LOYALTY BY BRINGING AKEMI TORIYAMA TO ME IN SECRET.
SADLY, IT WAS A SNEAK ATTACK. AN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION. MASTER FUDO DID EVERYTHING HE COULD.
BUT IT'S A RELIEF TO BE ABLE TO REPORT TO HIM THAT OUR LORD THE SHOGUN HAS TAKEN IN HIS FUTURE BRIDE UNSCATHED.
I HAD PORTRAITS OF HER THAT HAD CONVINCED ME OF HER UNBELIEVABLE BEAUTY, BUT NOW THAT I HAVE SEEN AKEMI HIME, THOSE IMAGES STRIKE ME AS INACCURATE AND INELEGANT.
THE REMEDY YOU GAVE HER WORKED ITS MAGIC. SHE IS STILL WEAK AND DISTRAUGHT, BUT HER BODY IS NO LONGER DISFIGURED BY WOUNDS FROM THE CRIMSON PLAGUE.
HER AMNESIA IS MOST LIKELY A SIDE EFFECT OF THE DISEASE, BUT MASTER FUDO BELIEVES THAT IS A GOOD THING.
AKEMI HIME'S CONVALESCENCE MUST NOT BE DISTURBED BY THE HORRIFIC MEMORY OF RECENT EVENTS. THE SHOCK OF IT COULD PROVE FATAL TO HER.

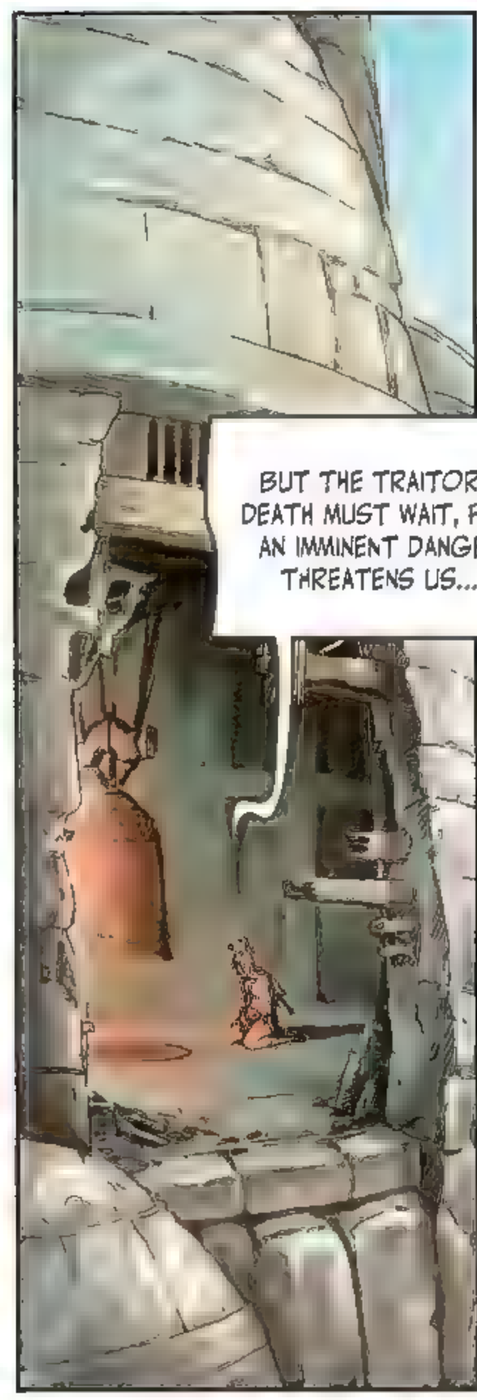
I AGREE WITH YOU, KAIDA-SAN, BUT I WANT TO KNOW HOW SHE CAME TO BE CONTAMINATED. THE CRIMSON PLAGUE STRIKES ONLY THOSE WHO DRINK FROM THE NON-PURIFIED RIVER WATER.
SOMEONE DELIBERATELY GAVE AKEMI HIME CONTAMINATED WATER. PERHAPS THE MAN WHO, WHILE CLAIMING TO HEAL, WANTED THE PLAGUE TO SPREAD.

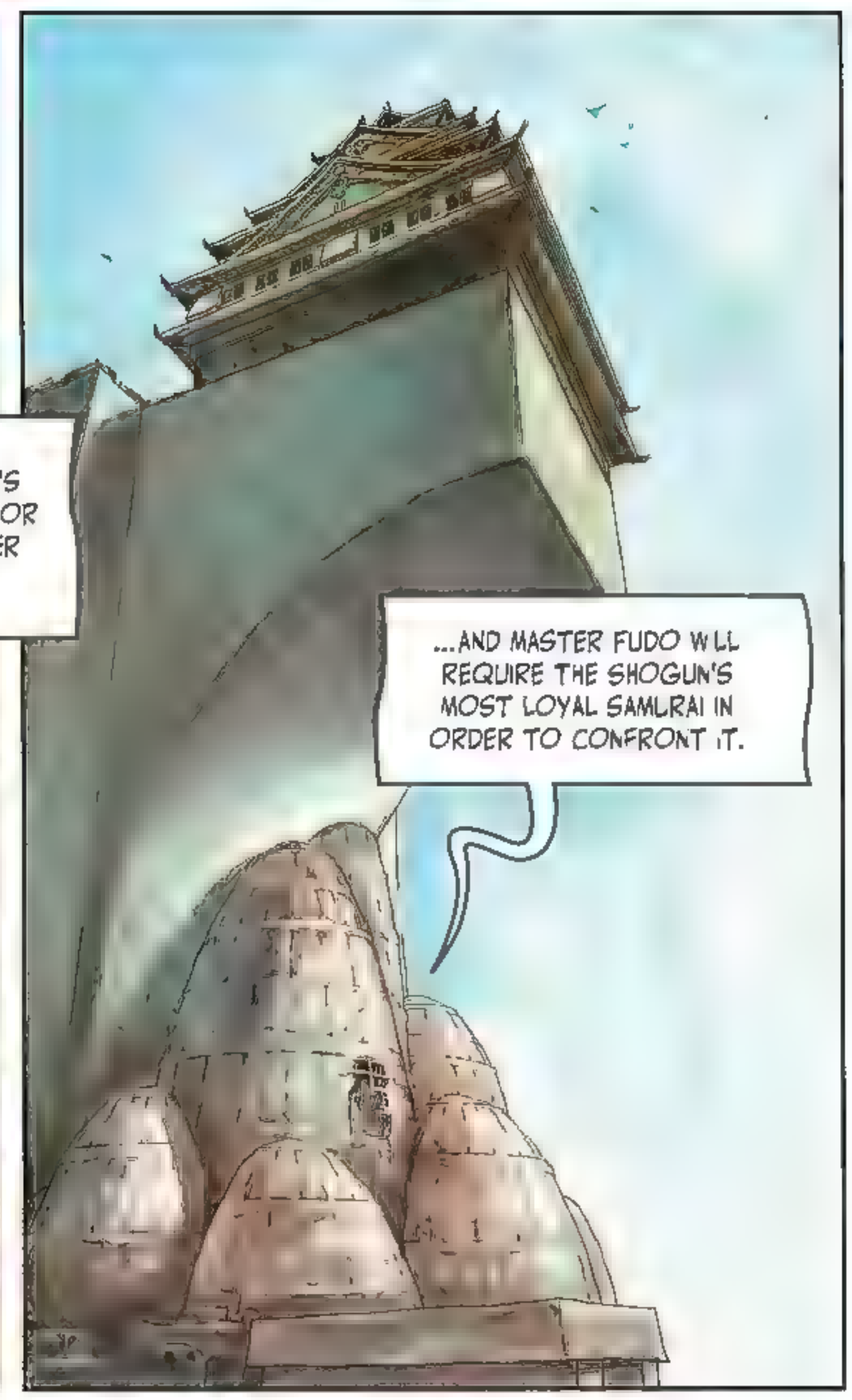
HOW STRANGE THAT DOCTOR MOREBITO WAS THE ONLY ONE TO SURVIVE THE SHINOBI ATTACK...

KAIZEN MOREBITO SAID HE LEFT AT THE BEHEST OF ARINORI-SAMA.

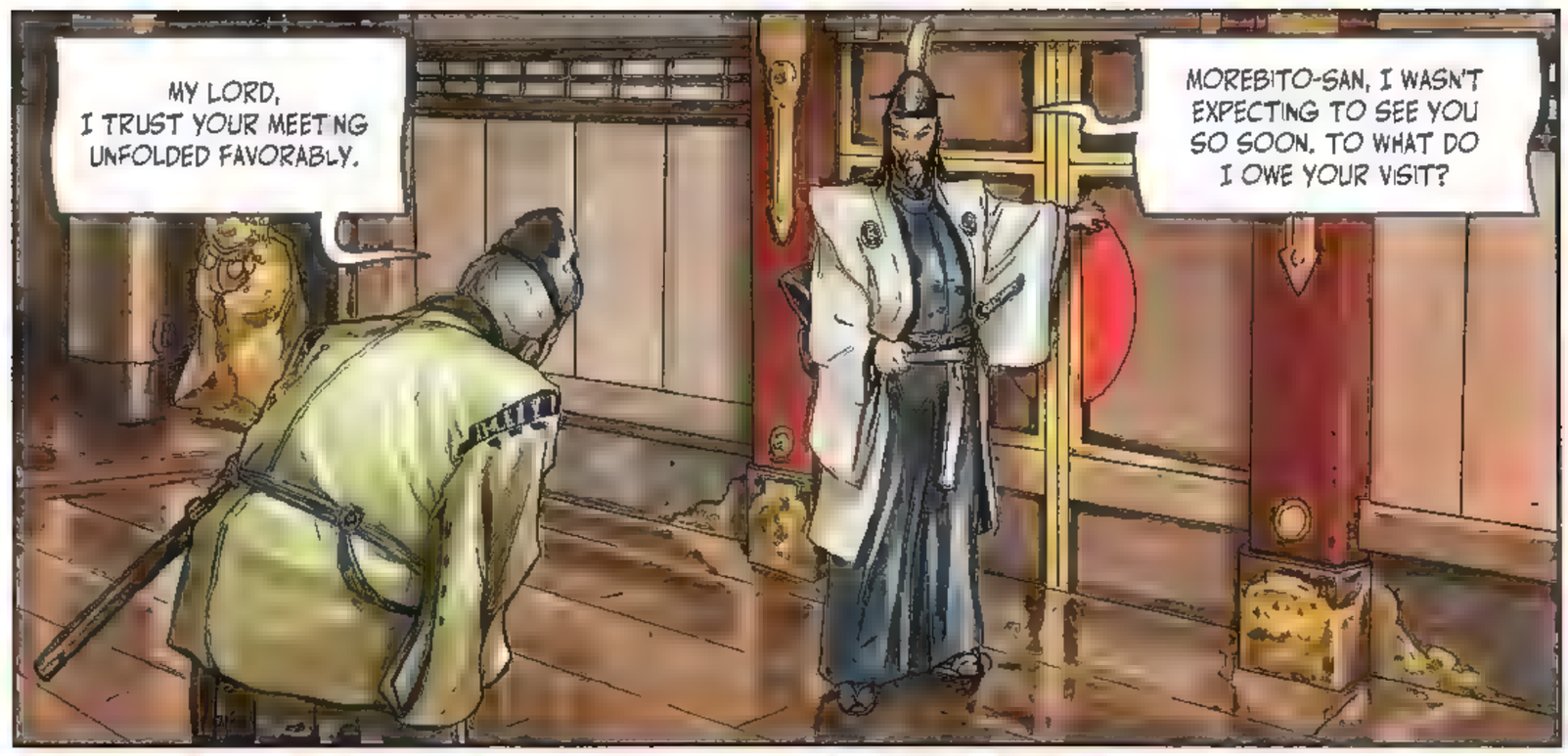
OH... NOT QUITE. KAIZEN HAD LEARNED ABOUT THE ATTACK. KAIDA SAW HIM LEAVE IN A HURRY EVEN THOUGH ARINORI-SAMA HAD ASKED HIM TO REMAIN AT HIS SIDE.
HE FEARED THAT THE REMEDY KAIDA BROUGHT MIGHT SAVE AKEMI, AND HE SAW THE TOTAL EXTERMINATION OF THE TORIYAMA CLAN AS HIS WAY OUT. IT WAS KAIZEN WHO PLANNED THE ATTACK WITH HIS SHINOBI ACCOMPLICES.


THE SHOGUN'S SILENCE IS MORE ELOQUENT THAN A THOUSAND WORDS...

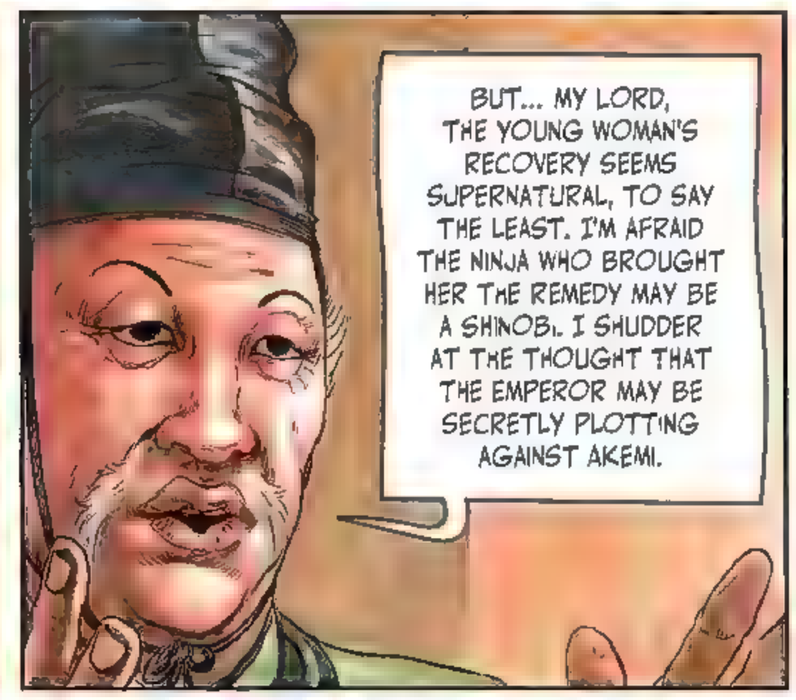

BUT THE TRAITOR'S DEATH MUST WAIT, FOR AN IMMINENT DANGER THREATENS US...

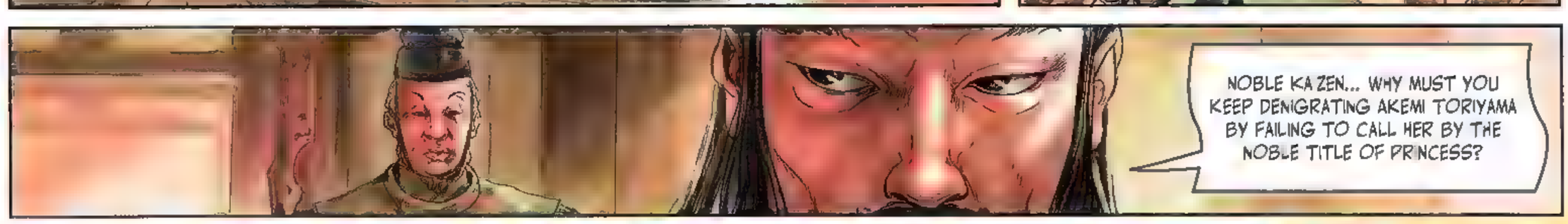

...AND MASTER FUDO WILL REQUIRE THE SHOGUN'S MOST LOYAL SAMURAI IN ORDER TO CONFRONT IT.

SKRRRR...

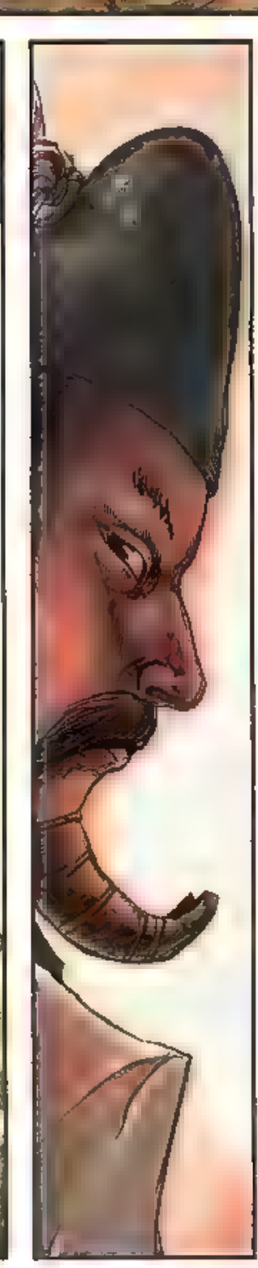

MY LORD, I TRUST YOUR MEETING UNFOLDED FAVORABLY.
MOREBITO-SAN, I WASN'T EXPECTING TO SEE YOU SO SOON. TO WHAT DO I OWE YOUR VISIT?

I KNOW YOUNG AKEMI'S PRESENCE IN THE PALACE MUST REMAIN SECRETIVE, BUT I HAVEN'T BEEN GRANTED PERMISSION TO SEE HER, EVEN THOUGH I AM–
NOBODY IS ALLOWED TO SEE HER.


BUT... MY LORD, THE YOUNG WOMAN'S RECOVERY SEEMS SUPERNATURAL, TO SAY THE LEAST. I'M AFRAID THE NINJA WHO BROUGHT HER THE REMEDY MAY BE A SHINOBI. I SHUDDER AT THE THOUGHT THAT THE EMPEROR MAY BE SECRETLY PLOTTING AGAINST AKEMI.


NOBLE KAZEN... WHY MUST YOU KEEP DENIGRATING AKEMI TORIYAMA BY FAILING TO CALL HER BY THE NOBLE TITLE OF PRINCESS?

IT'S... NOT TO DWELL ON THE SITUATION, BUT... THE TORIYAMA CLAN NO LONGER EXISTS AND AS SUCH...THEIR TITLES OF NOBILITY NO LONGER HAVE ANY VALUE.
THUS IT WOULD BE UNWISE...TO FOLLOW THROUGH WITH THE INTENT TO MARRY HER.



I SHALL REMEMBER YOUR PRECIOUS WORDS, KAIZEN-SAN, FEAR NOT. BUT RIGHT NOW, I MUST ATTEND TO MORE URGENT MATTERS.
MORE URGENT? DOES IT CONCERN THE EMPEROR?

I CAN ONLY TELL YOU THAT AN ANCIENT THREAT IS ABOUT TO AWAKE FROM ITS ETERNAL SLUMBER.
MORE ANCIENT AND TERRIBLE THAN THE EMPEROR HIMSELF.

I SEE IWAREBIKO NO MIKOTO, DESCENDENT OF MY DAUGHTER AMATERASU, PROCLAIMING HIMSELF JINMU TEN'NO, IMMORTAL CELESTIAL SOVEREIGN.
SUCH INFLATED ARROGANCE. I CAN FEEL IT IN THE TREMBLING OF THE EARTH, WHICH INTENSIFIES UNDER THE FEET OF HIS MPOSING ARMY.
JINMU TEN'NO PROMISES DEATH TO THE HIRUKOTE IF THEY DO NOT RENOUNCE THE FAITH THEY HAVE IN ME, THE PARIAH KAMI.
HE PROMISES THEM PROSPERITY IN EXCHANGE FOR THEIR SERVITUDE. THEY MUST JOIN HIS TROOPS TO FORM ONE GREAT EMPIRE OF THE LANDS OF NIHON UNDER THE BANNER OF ALL KAMI IN ALL THEIR PERFECTION...
...THOSE ARE BUT THE LIES OF A PRESUMPTUOUS CHILD. PERFECTION DOES NOT EXIST, NOT EVEN AMONG THE KAMI. I AM LIVING PROOF OF THAT.
AND THE KAMI CAN RENOUNCE ME ALL THEY WANT, BUT WE ARE FROM THE SAME LINE.
DO NOT OFFEND ME ANY FURTHER BY TRYNG TO HIDE FROM MY SIGHT. TELL ME WHAT YOU HAVE COME TO DO.
HMM... NOTHING ESCAPES YOUR EYES, HIRUKO. THEY WOULD BE A GREAT ASSET TO ME.

THE WISDOM OF THE FIRE IS NO LONGER ENOUGH FOR YOU, FUDO MYO? THE EDICT OF MY DEMISE HAS JUST BEEN MADE AND YOU'VE COME TO WREST MY EYES?

I WILL NOT RESPOND TO YOUR INSULT, HIRUKO. IN TRUTH, I HAVE COME TO RESTORE SOME HOPE.

I FASHIONED THIS MASK WITH MY OWN HANDS. HAVE A WORTHY MORTAL WEAR IT, AND HE WILL POSSESS THE POWER TO DEFEAT ANY ARMY.

I SPIT ON YOUR PITY! I PREFER BEING FORGOTTEN!

BE NOT MISTAKEN, HIRUKO. JINMU IS STILL YOUNG AND MUST BE TAUGHT A LESSON. ALL KAMI, IN FACT, SHOULD LEARN FROM WHAT ONLY YOU CAN DISPENSE.

LOOK AT ME, FUDO MYO. WHAT TEACHINGS DO YOU THINK I AM ABLE TO DISPENSE? EVEN MY BROTHERS CONCEIVE OF ME AS A MISTAKE.

WE VIEW AS MISTAKES THAT WHICH WE DO NOT YET UNDERSTAND ABOUT OUR OWN NATURE. WE REJECT IT THROUGH AND THROUGH, BUT IT REMAINS WITHIN US.

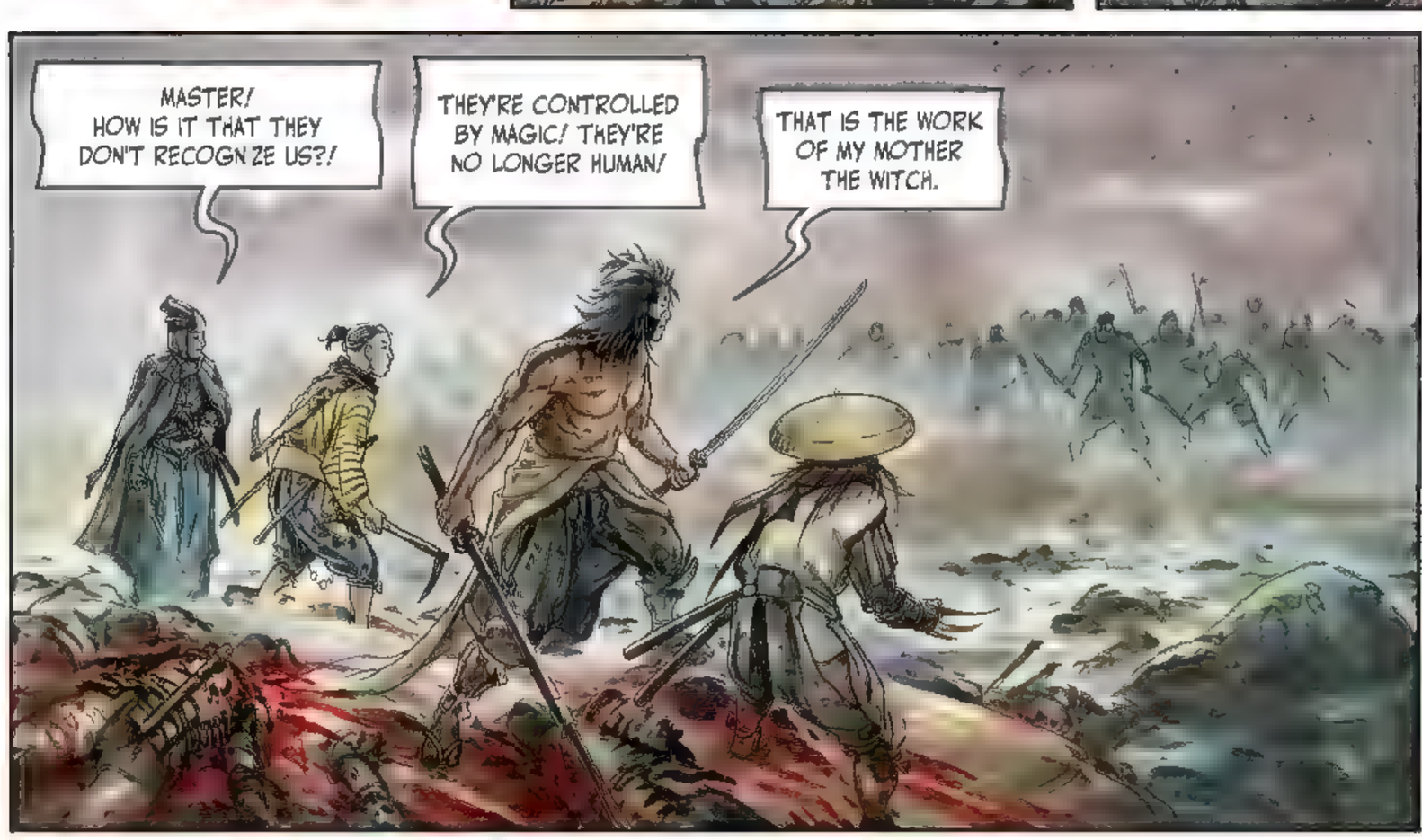
BANISHING IT FROM OUR EXISTENCE IS NO SOLUTION.

YOU MUST NOT GIVE IN TO OUR FEARS. FORCE US TO TAKE SOME TIME BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.

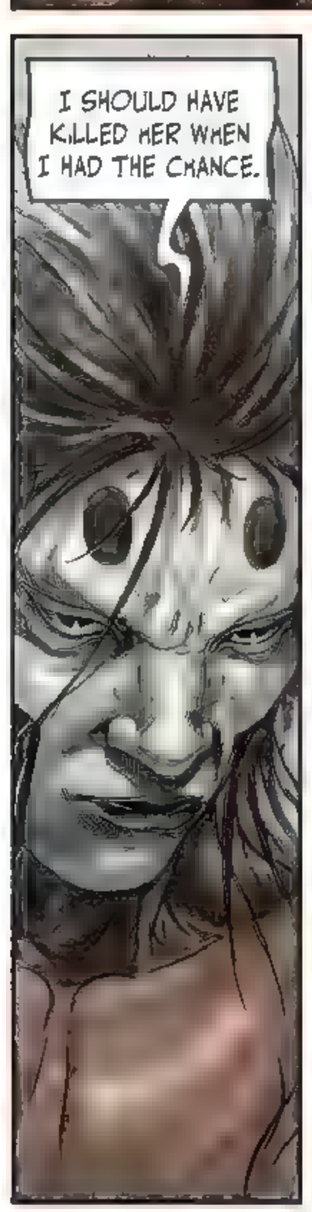
FOR WITHOUT HIRUKO, THE NATURE OF THE KAMI WOULD BE INCOMPLETE.

WHEN FUDO RETURNED TO THE DOKUTSU DOJO, THE DARKNESS OF HIS FURY CAST A SHADOW ON THE FEW REMAINING SHREDS OF HUMANITY IN HIM.

HE DIDN'T SEEM TO CARE THAT HE WAS FIGHTING AGAINST HIS OWN NINJAS.


MASTER! HOW IS IT THAT THEY DON'T RECOGNIZE US?!
THEY'RE CONTROLLED BY MAGIC! THEY'RE NO LONGER HUMAN!
THAT IS THE WORK OF MY MOTHER THE WITCH.

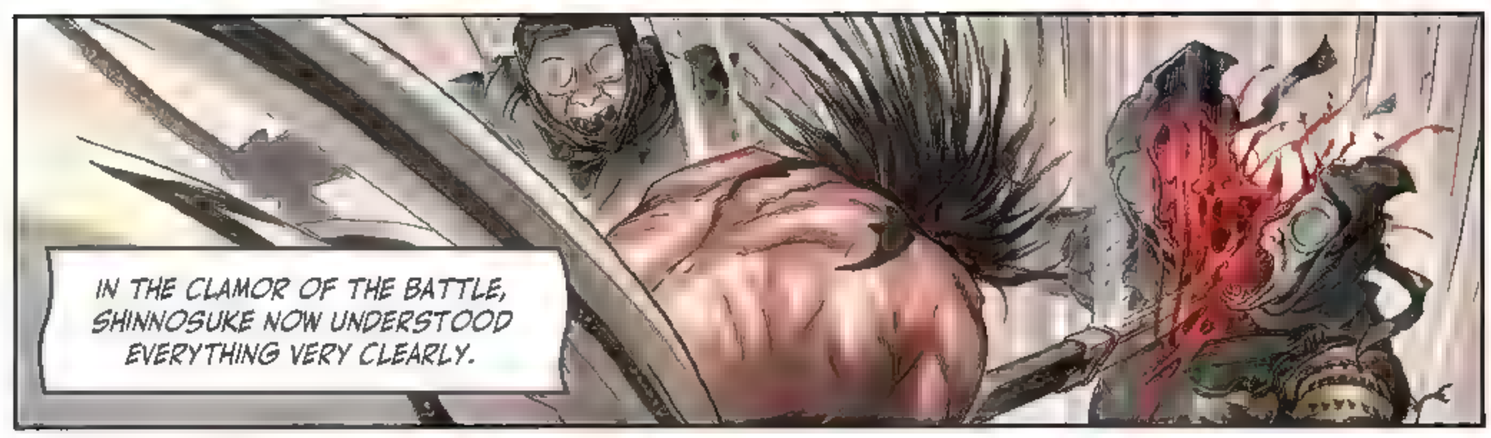
THE EYE OF HIRUKO MUST HAVE AWAKENED ALL HER MIKKYO MAGIC.
AND SHE DID ALL THIS... WHILE YOU WERE AWAY?


I SHOULD HAVE KILLED HER WHEN I HAD THE CHANCE.

THE MALEFICENT WREATHS OF SMOKE OF THE PRIESTESS NOBU NOW POSSESSED EVERY MAN, EVERY STATUE, AND EVERY STONE OF THE DOKUTSU DOJO.
BUT IT WAS SURELY ONLY A GLIMPSE OF WHAT HIS MOTHER HAD BECOME, FUDO FEARED.

HOLD THEM BACK AS LONG AS YOU CAN. I'M GOING TO SLICE MY WAY THROUGH AND CUT OFF THAT SERPENT'S HEAD.

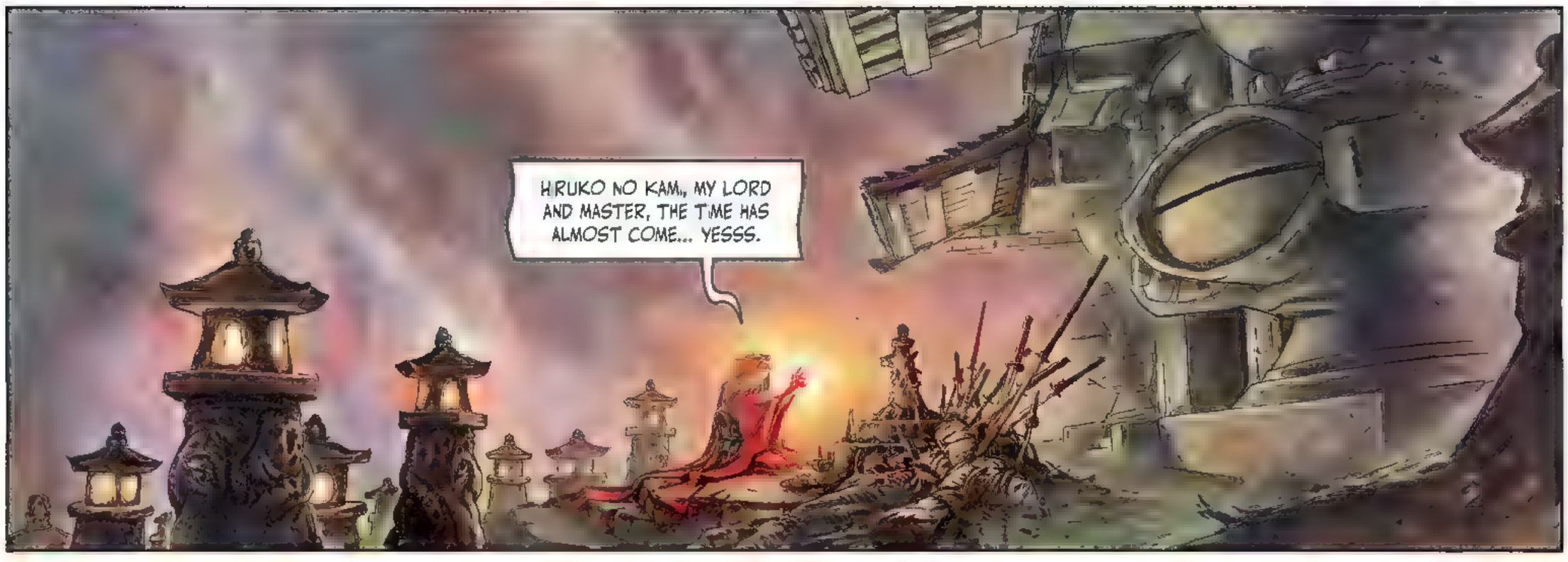
THAT WRETCHED BEING I WAS ONCE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO CALL "MOTHER!"


IN THE CLAMOR OF THE BATTLE, SHINNOSUKE NOW UNDERSTOOD EVERYTHING VERY CLEARLY.

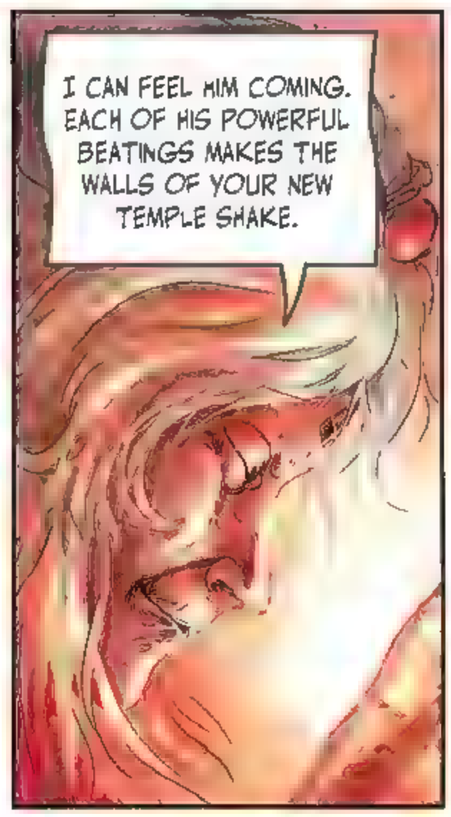
HIS ENTIRE BEING WAS DRIVEN BY INCORRUPTIBLE AND IRREPRESSIBLE INTENTIONS, CAPABLE OF DESTROYING ANYONE WHO STOOD IN HIS WAY.

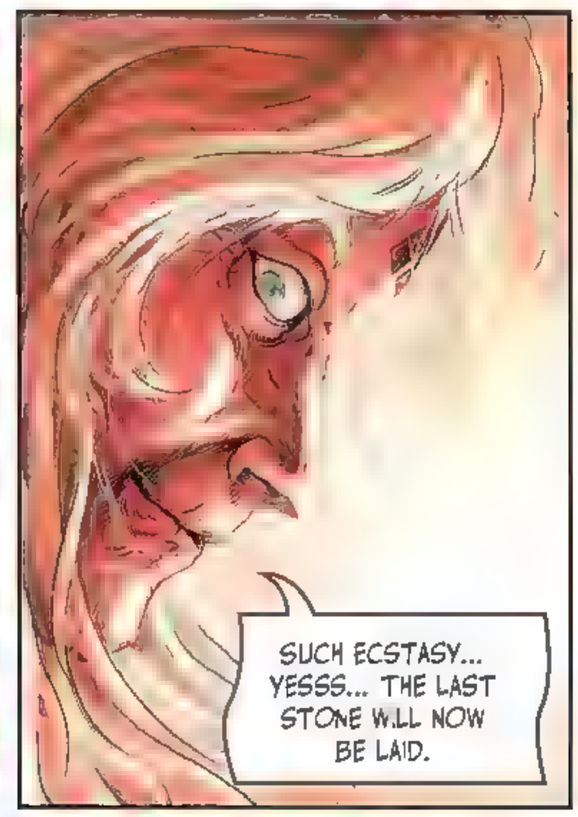
THE POWER OF FUDO WAS NOW IRREVOCABLY LINKED TO HIS OWN PERSON...

...IMBUING HIM WITH ENOUGH STRENGTH TO BREAK EVEN A KAMI'S BONES.


HIRUKO NO KAMI, MY LORD AND MASTER, THE TIME HAS ALMOST COME... YESSS.

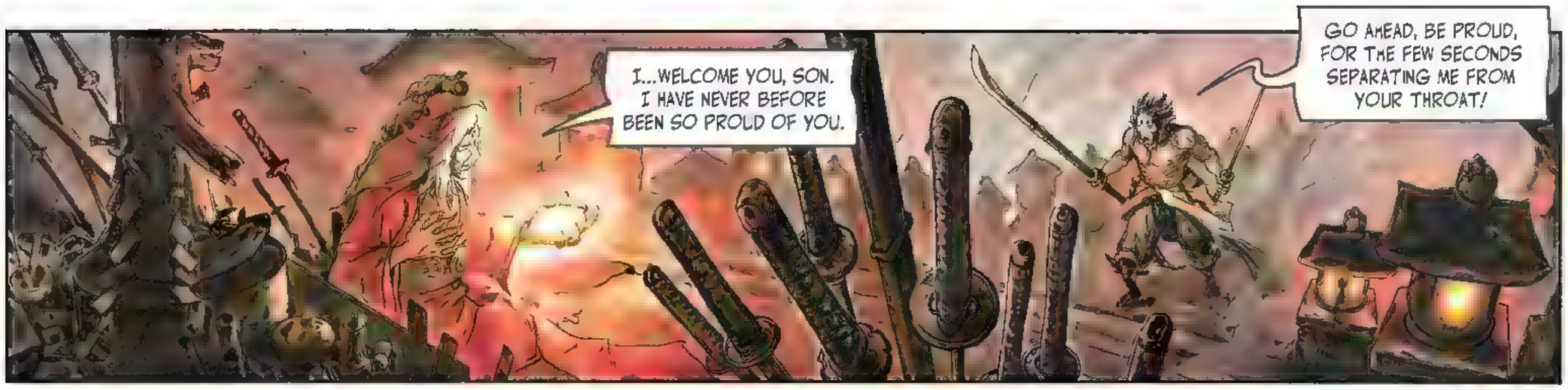
THE HOUR OF YOUR LIBERATION...WILL TRANSPIRE THROUGH ALL THESE WET STONES...


I CAN FEEL HIM COMING. EACH OF HIS POWERFUL BEATINGS MAKES THE WALLS OF YOUR NEW TEMPLE SHAKE.


SUCH ECSTASY... YESSS... THE LAST STONE WILL NOW BE LAID.

HAW!

LOOK AT ME, MOTHER! I HAVE AT LAST BECOME A HARBINGER OF DEATH, JUST AS YOU HAVE ALWAYS WANTED.

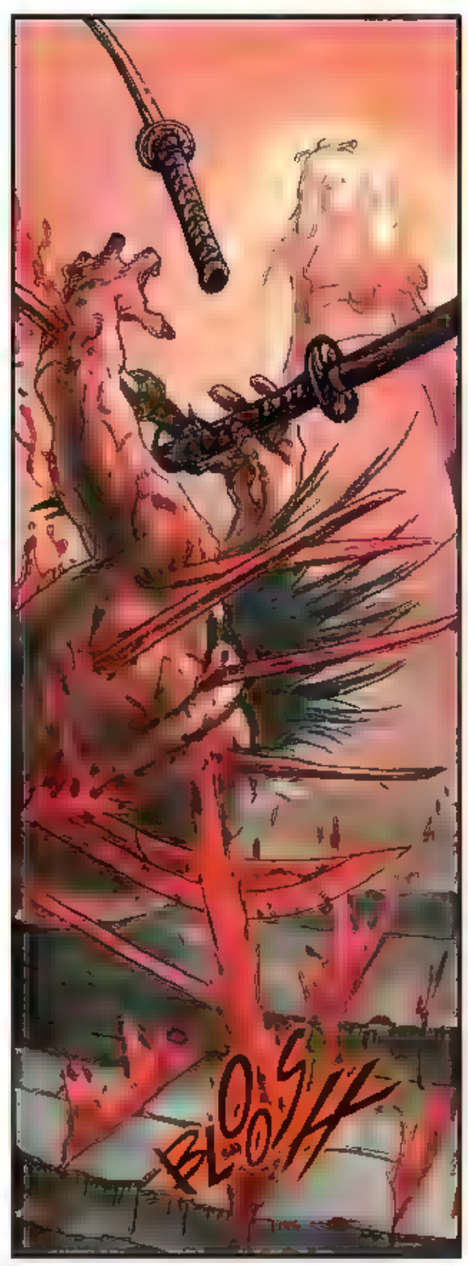

I...WELCOME YOU, SON. I HAVE NEVER BEFORE BEEN SO PROUD OF YOU.
GO AHEAD, BE PROUD, FOR THE FEW SECONDS SEPARATING ME FROM YOUR THROAT!

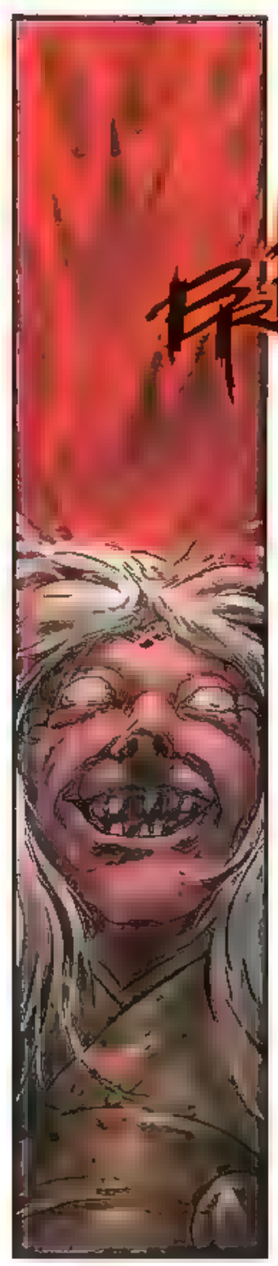
THAT IS NOT WHY THE POWER OF FUDO WAS GRANTED TO YOU!

HIRUKO'S DESIRE IS ANCIENT... YESSS. HE HAS BEEN CLAMORING FOR HIS MASK FOR CENTURIES. HOW COULD YOU EVER FATHOM GOING UP AGAINST HIM?

YOU BELONG TO HIM!

AAAAAH!


BLOSH



BRROU

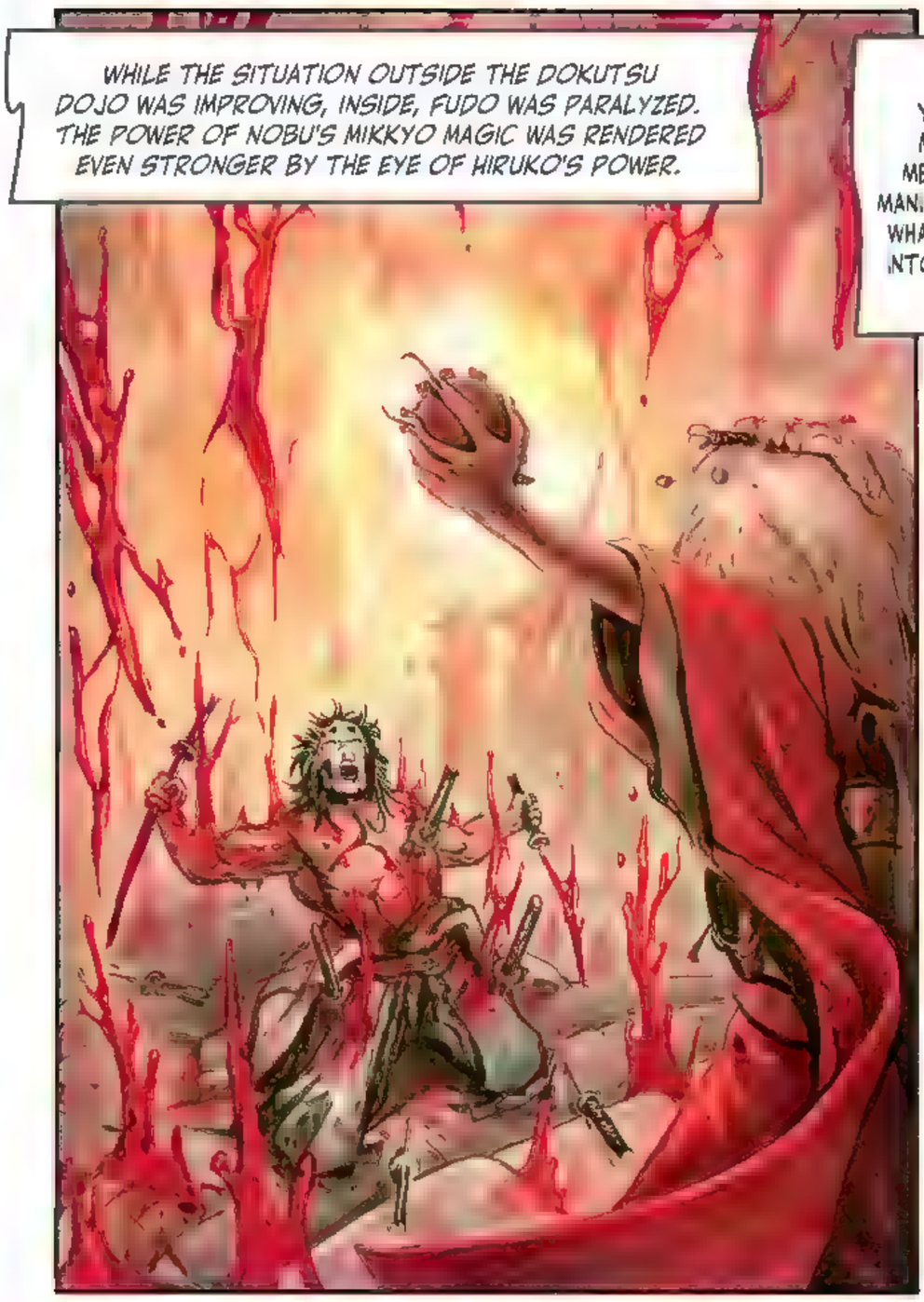
CURSES! WHAT DEVILRY IS THIS?

DON'T GET DISTRACTED! WE MUST TRUST THE MASTER! REGARDLESS OF WHAT HE DOES IN THERE!

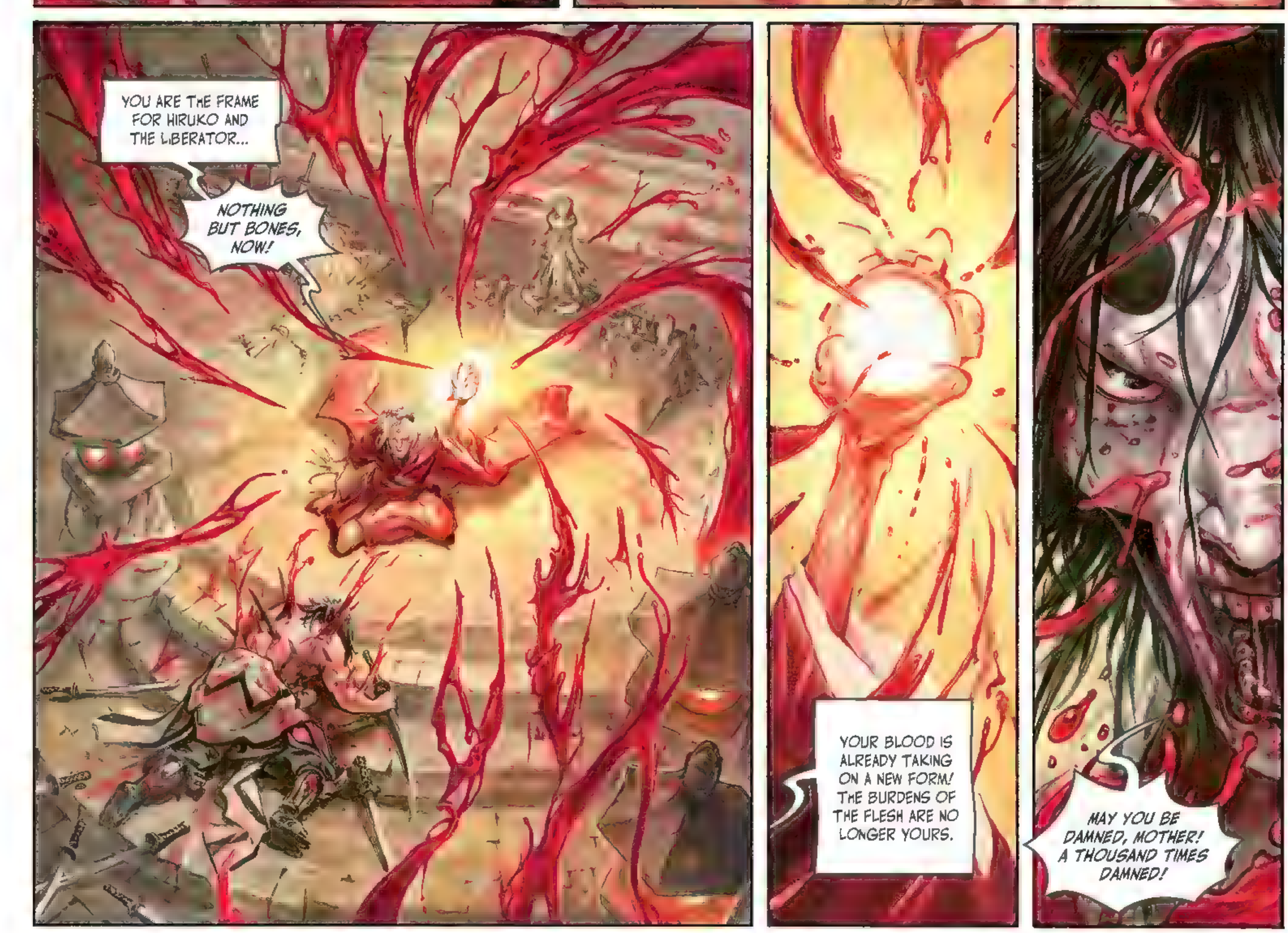
TOUM TOUM TOUM TOUM TOUM TOUM
WHAT THE...? TENAGA, DO YOU HEAR THAT, TOO?
IT'S THE SHOGUN'S WAR DRUMS!

KYAAAA!

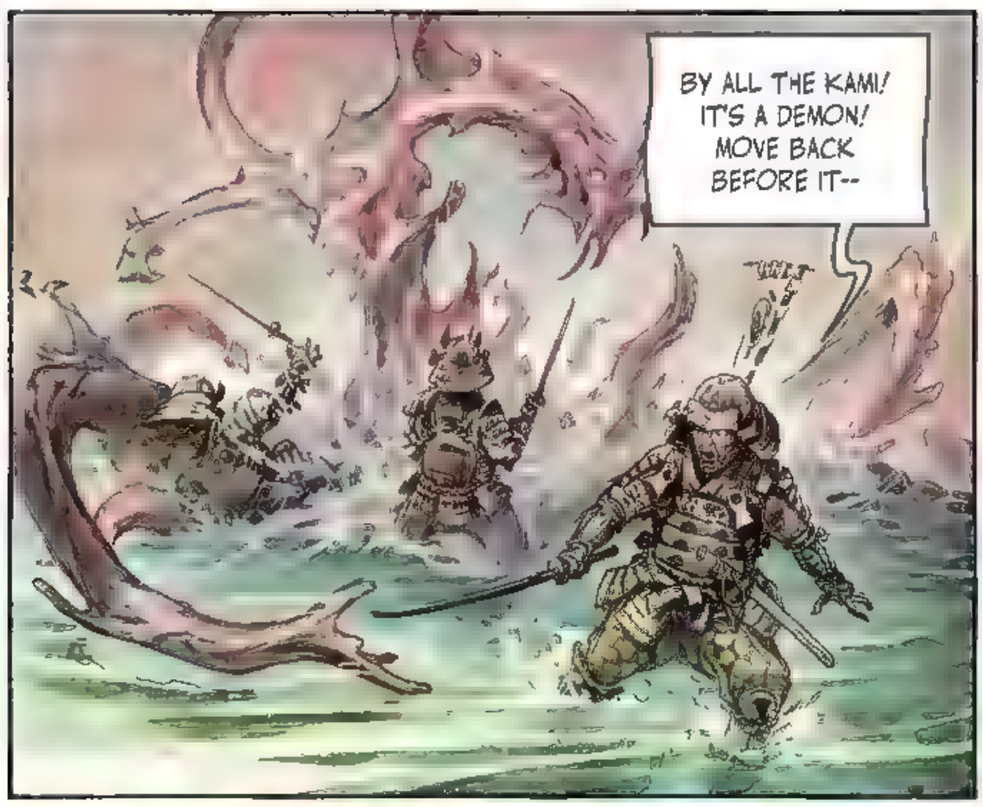
HARO HARO, COMPANIONS! KAIDA STILL HAS TIME TO SAVE THE MATSURI!


WHILE THE SITUATION OUTSIDE THE DOKUTSU DOJO WAS IMPROVING, INSIDE, FUDO WAS PARALYZED. THE POWER OF NOBU'S MIKKYO MAGIC WAS RENDERED EVEN STRONGER BY THE EYE OF HIRUKO'S POWER.

YOU ONLY RID MIKIKO FROM ME IN ORDER TO MANIPULATE ME... AND WHAT YOU MADE ME INTO... KILLED HER!
NOTHING WILL PREVENT ME FROM KILLING YOU. NOT EVEN YOUR LITTLE MIKKYO GAMES.
YESSS... SPOKEN LIKE MY BASTARD SON... ALWAYS A SLAVE TO THE BONDS HERE BELOW. BUT YOU ARE NOT SHINNOSUKE... NO, NOT ANYMORE.


YOU ARE THE FRAME FOR HIRUKO AND THE LIBERATOR...
NOTHING BUT BONES, NOW!
YOUR BLOOD IS ALREADY TAKING ON A NEW FORM! THE BURDENS OF THE FLESH ARE NO LONGER YOURS.
MAY YOU BE DAMNED, MOTHER! A THOUSAND TIMES DAMNED!

WHY HAVE YOU COME, KADA? MASTER FUDO SAID YOU BETRAYED HIM!


BY ALL THE KAMI! IT'S A DEMON! MOVE BACK BEFORE IT--

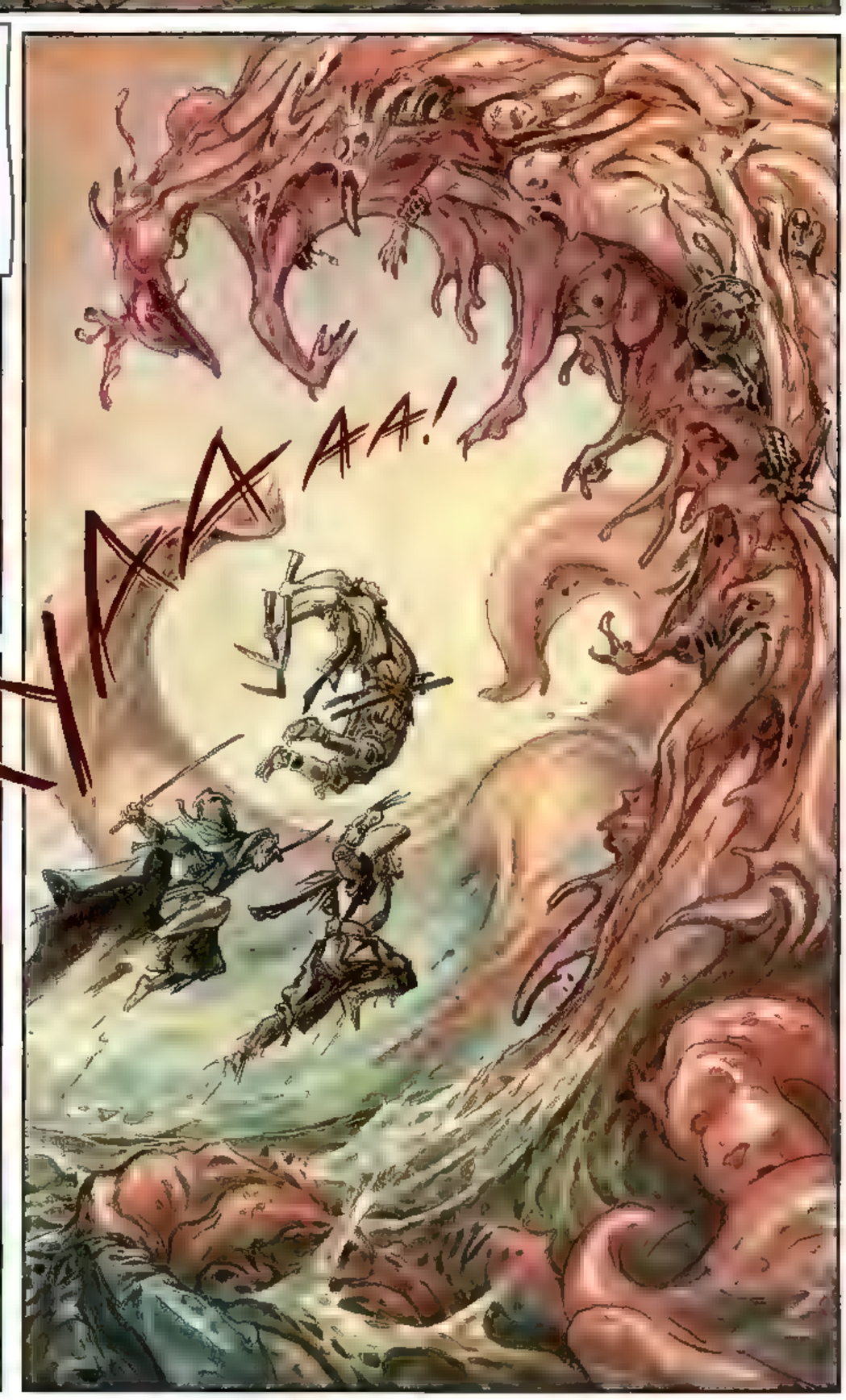
ARGH!

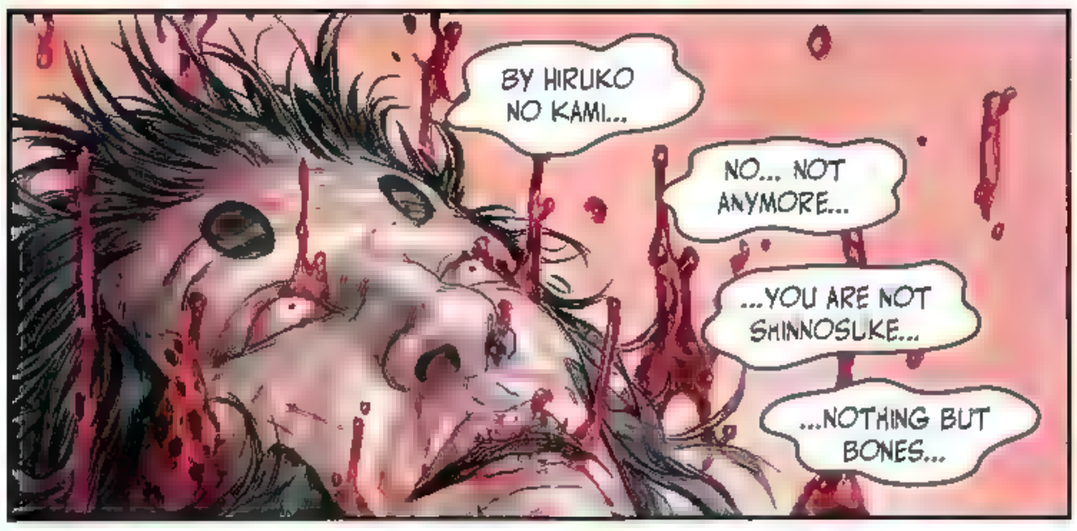
DID NOBU'S MAGIC CREATE THIS THING?

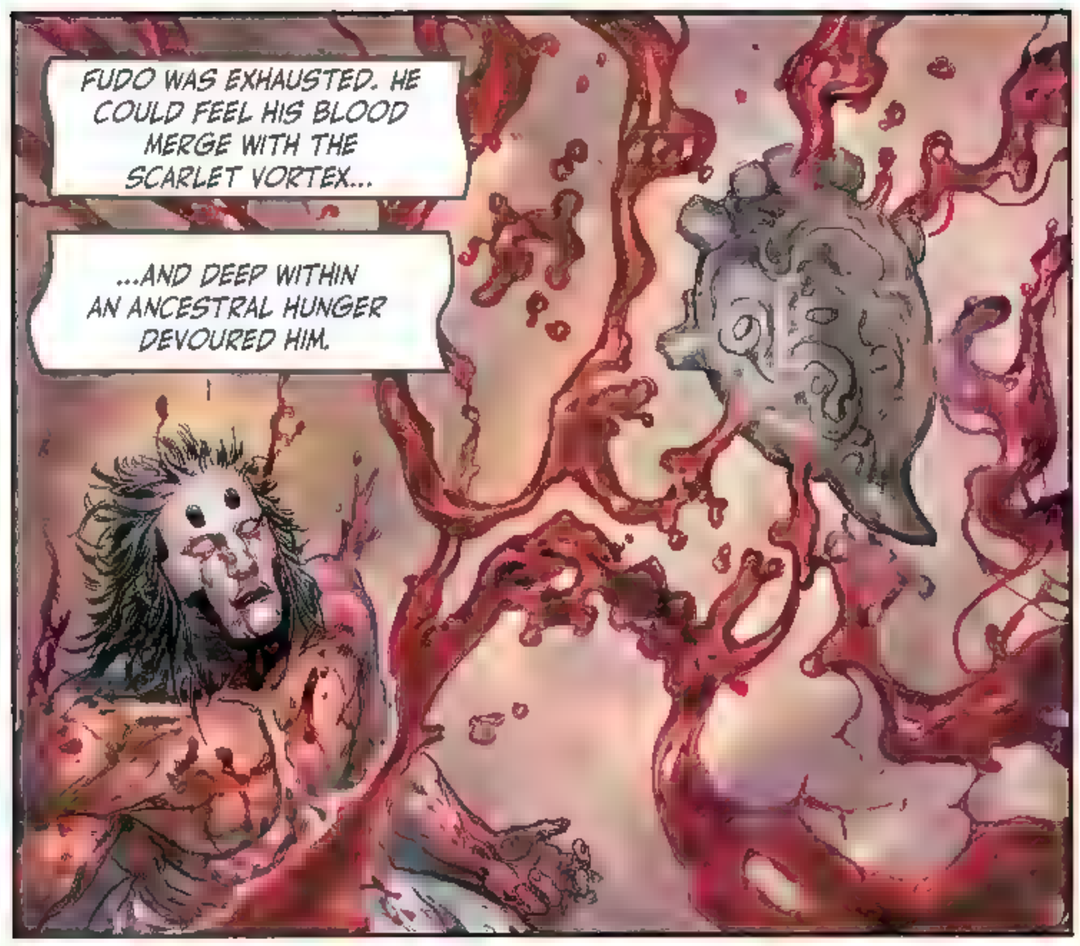
THIS MEANS THAT MASTER FUDO IS--
HE'S STILL ALIVE, TRUST KAIDA! BUT WE WILL SOON BE DEAD IF THE ONIS DON'T COME TO OUR A.D.

DID YOU SAY ONIS? WELL THEN THAT REMINDS ME OF SOMETHING. MY FRIENDS, IF WE ARE ABOUT TO DIE...

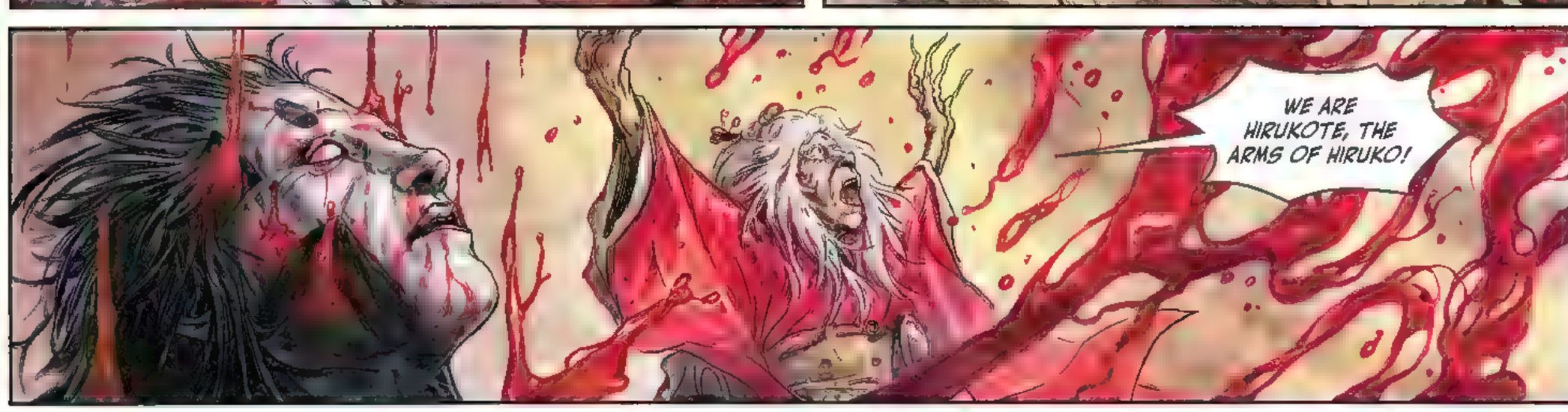
...LET US DO SO IN HONOR OF THE PAST!

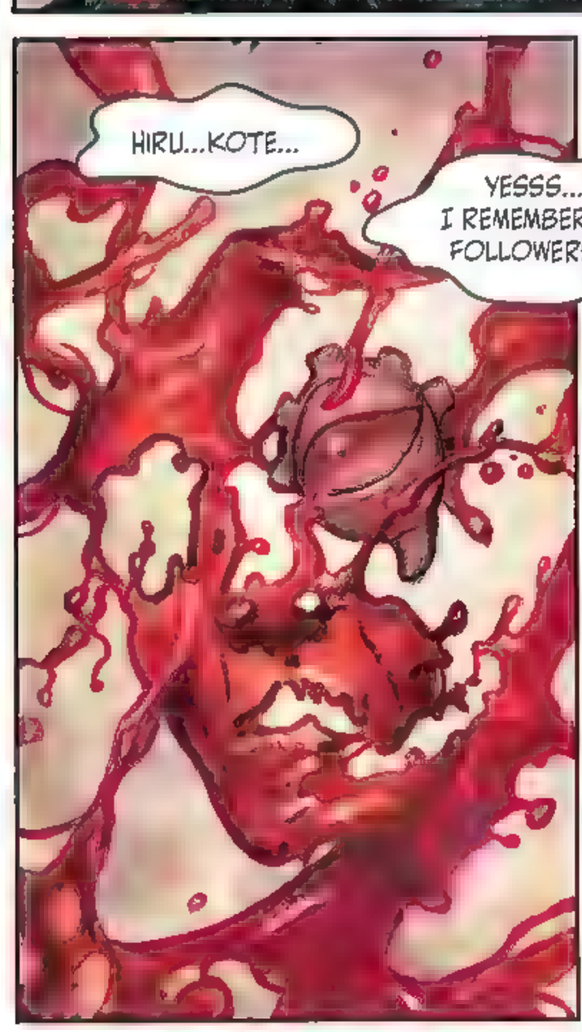

KHAAA!


BY HIRUKO NO KAMI...
NO... NOT ANYMORE...
...YOU ARE NOT SHINNOSUKE...
...NOTHING BUT BONES...

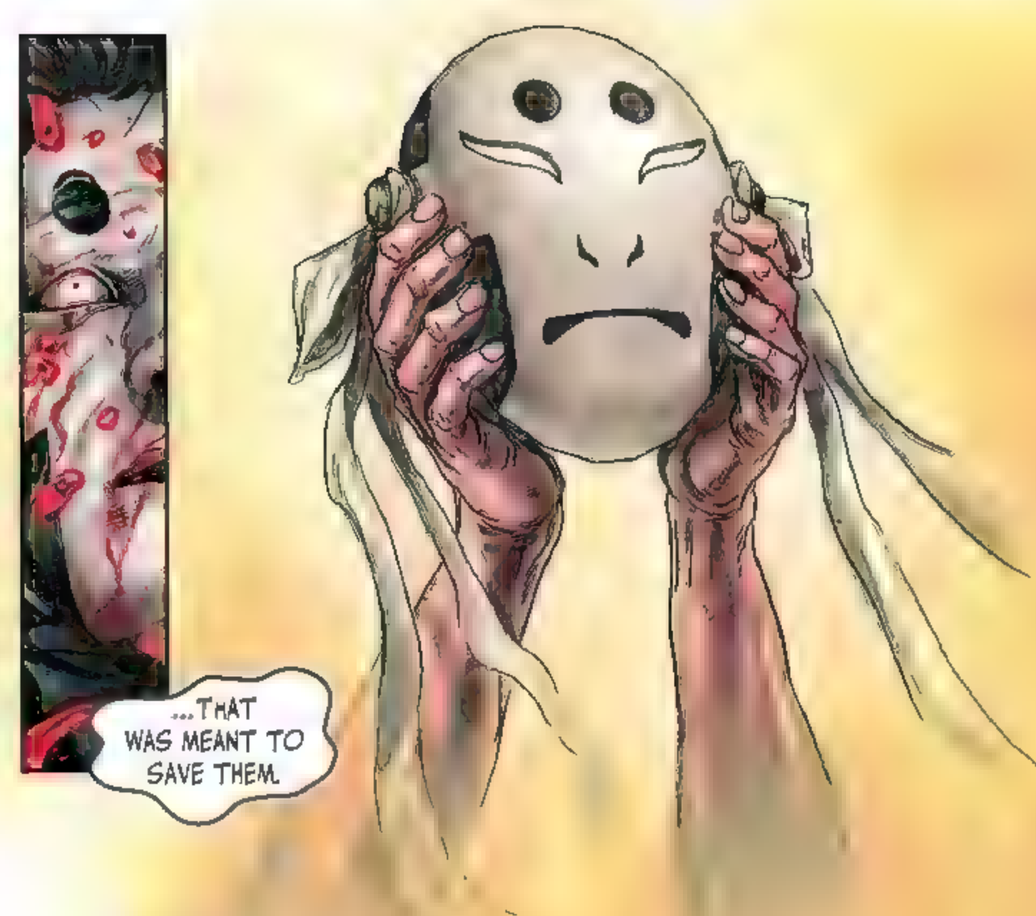

FUDO WAS EXHAUSTED. HE COULD FEEL HIS BLOOD MERGE WITH THE SCARLET VORTEX...
...AND DEEP WITHIN AN ANCESTRAL HUNGER DEVOURED HIM.

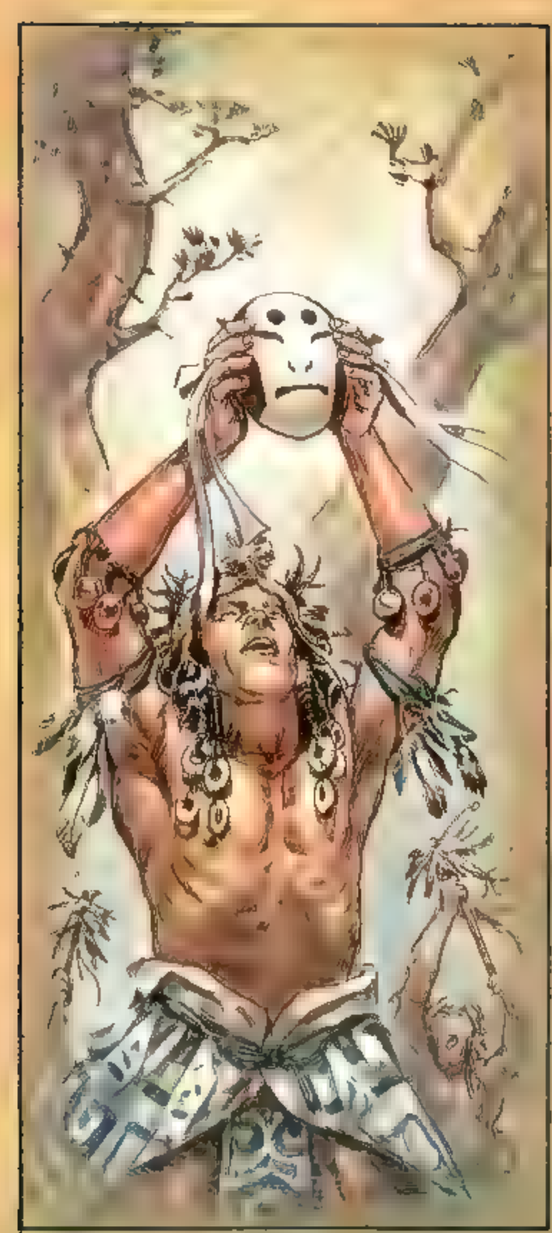
SOMETHING WAS COMING OUT OF THAT VOID, AND ITS FIRST WAIL VIBRATED LIKE A ROAR, REACHING DEEP INTO FUDO'S BONES.
MY LORD HIRUKO, YOUR SERVANTS LIBERATE YOU FROM THE OBLIVION OF TIME!


WE ARE HIRUKOTE, THE ARMS OF HIRUKO!


HIRU...KOTE...
YESSS... I REMEMBER MY FOLLOWERS...

AND I REMEMBER THE MASK...

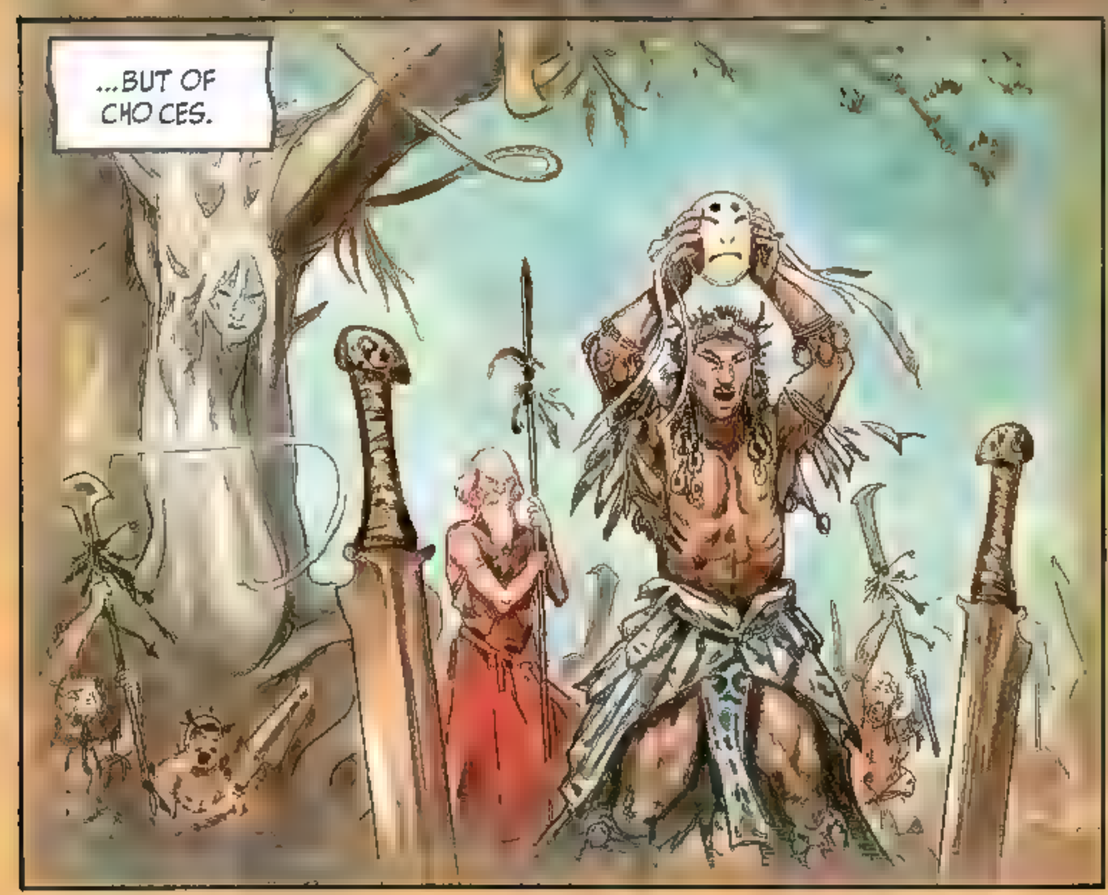

...THAT WAS MEANT TO SAVE THEM.

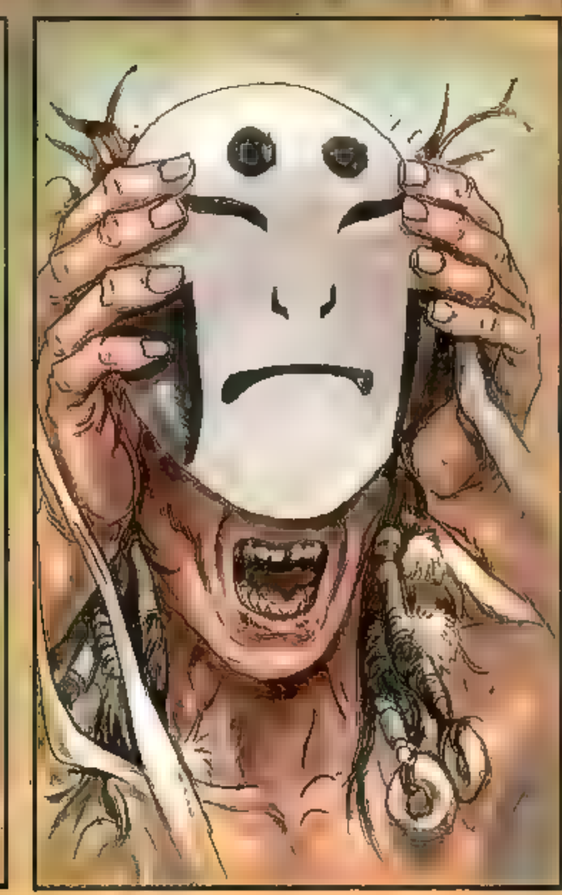


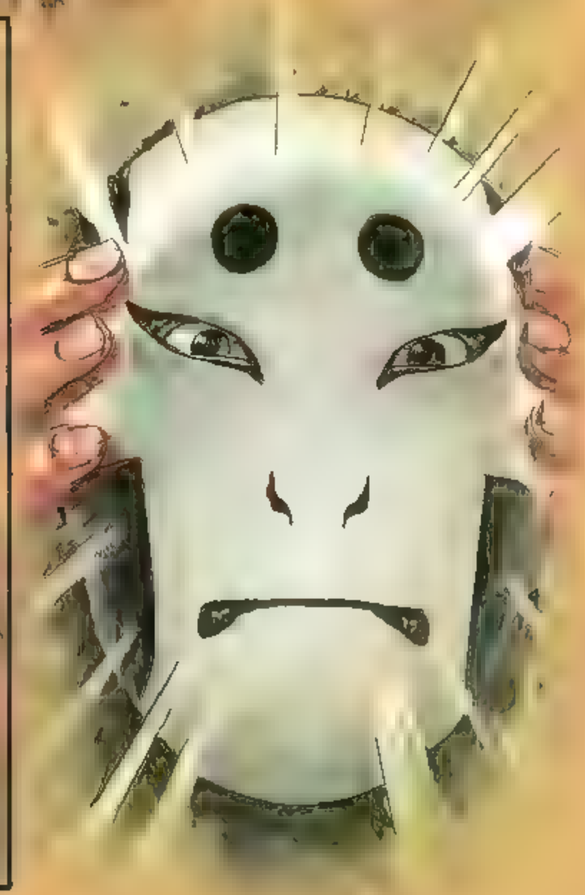
JINMU TEN'NO, MY HOLY LORD. WHY NOT GIVE THE ORDER TO ATTACK?

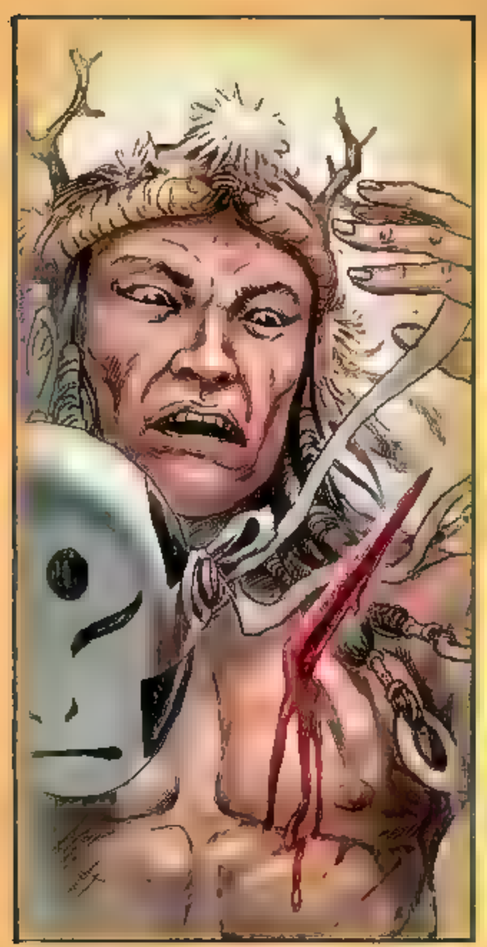
THEY ARE NOTHING BUT FISHERMEN WITH BLASPHEMOUS BELIEFS.
GENERAL, I WAGE THIS WAR TO UNITE THE CLANS OF NIHON, NOT DESTROY THEM.

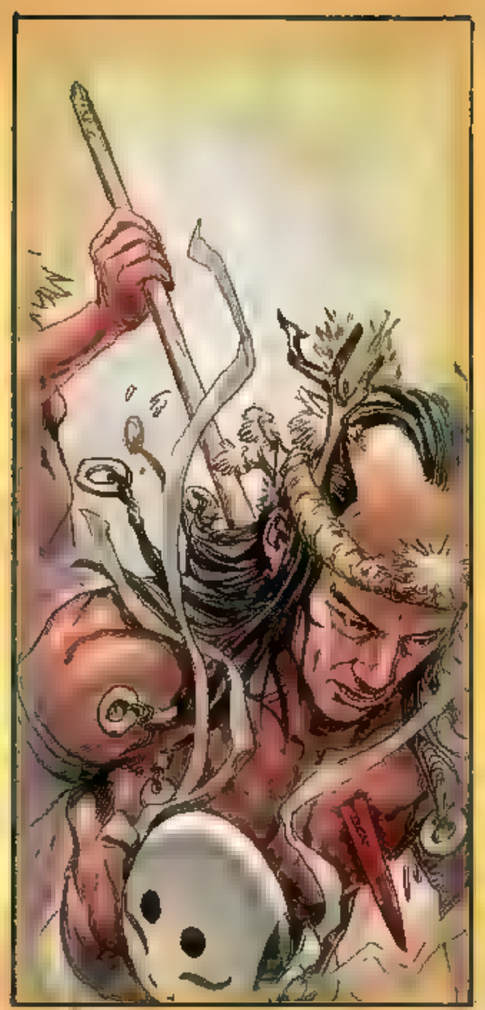
I EXPECT TO SEE EVIDENCE OF WISDOM IN YOU, FOR WHEN YOU ARE SHOGUN, YOU WILL CARRY MY VOICE TO THE MORTALS.
THIS LAST BATTLE WILL NOT BE ONE OF WEAPONS...

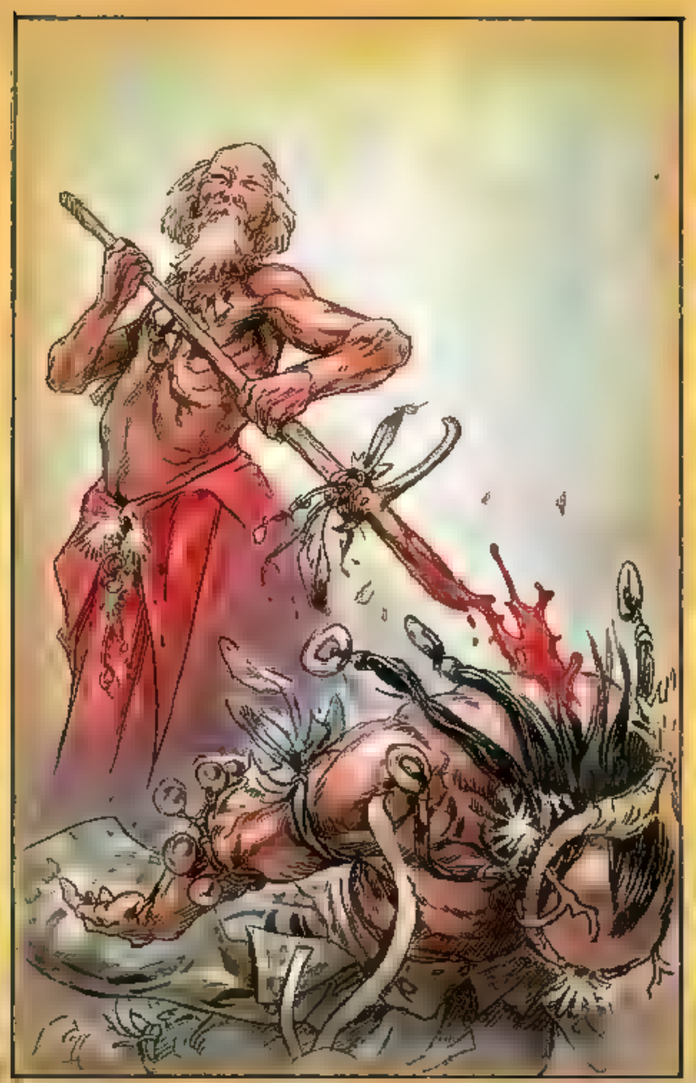

...BUT OF CHOICES.

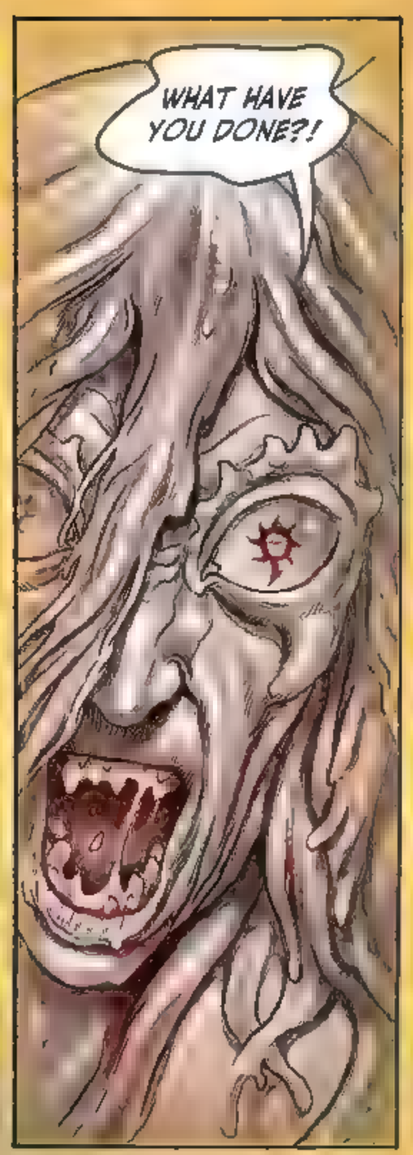








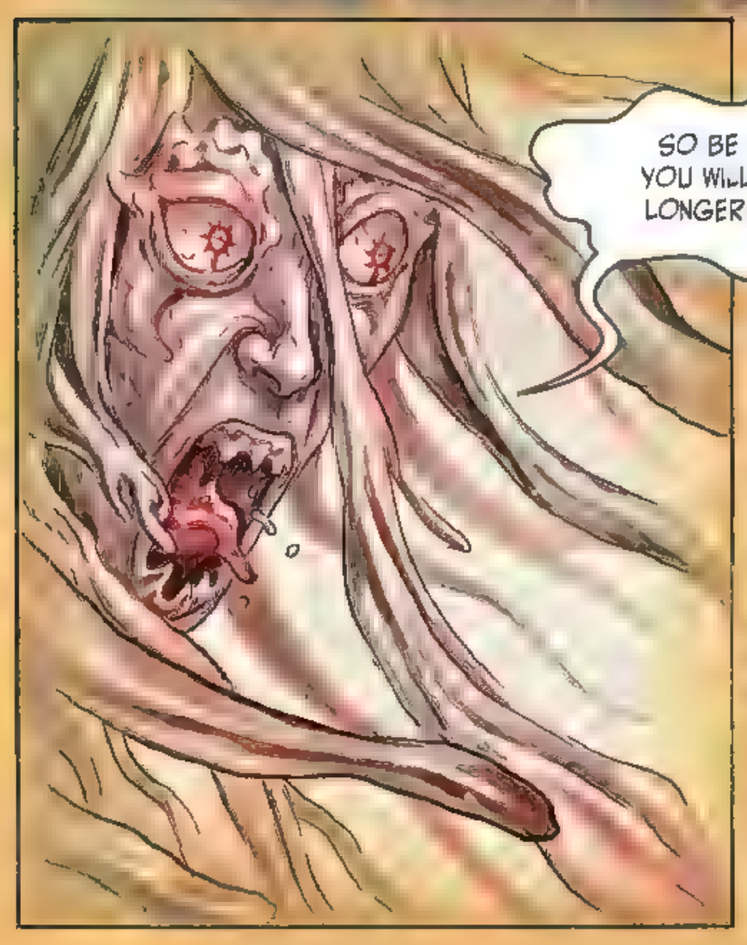


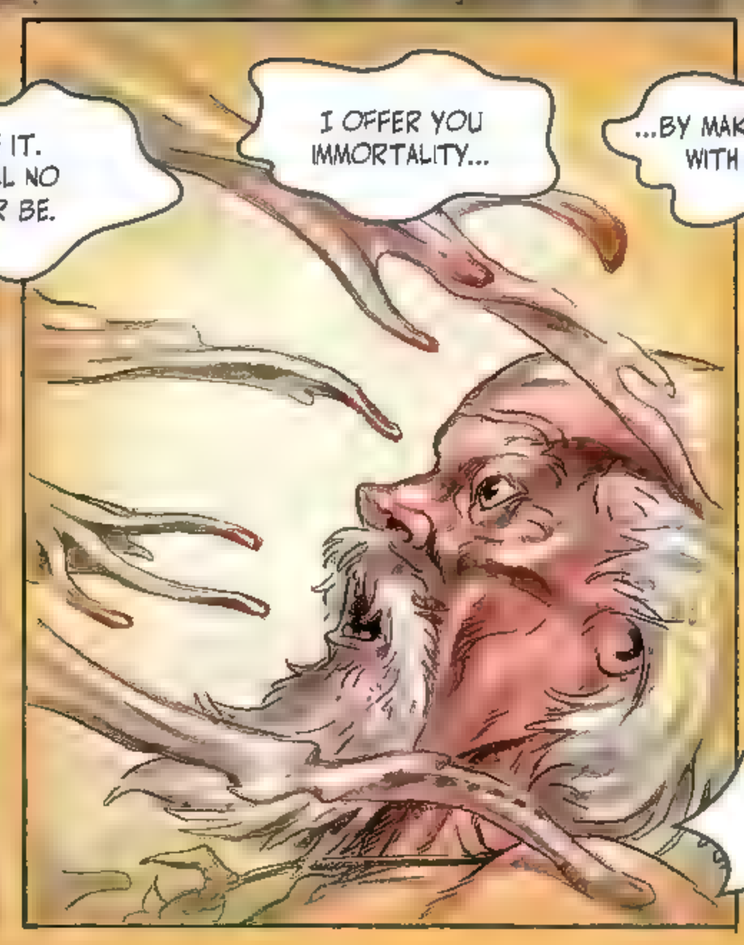


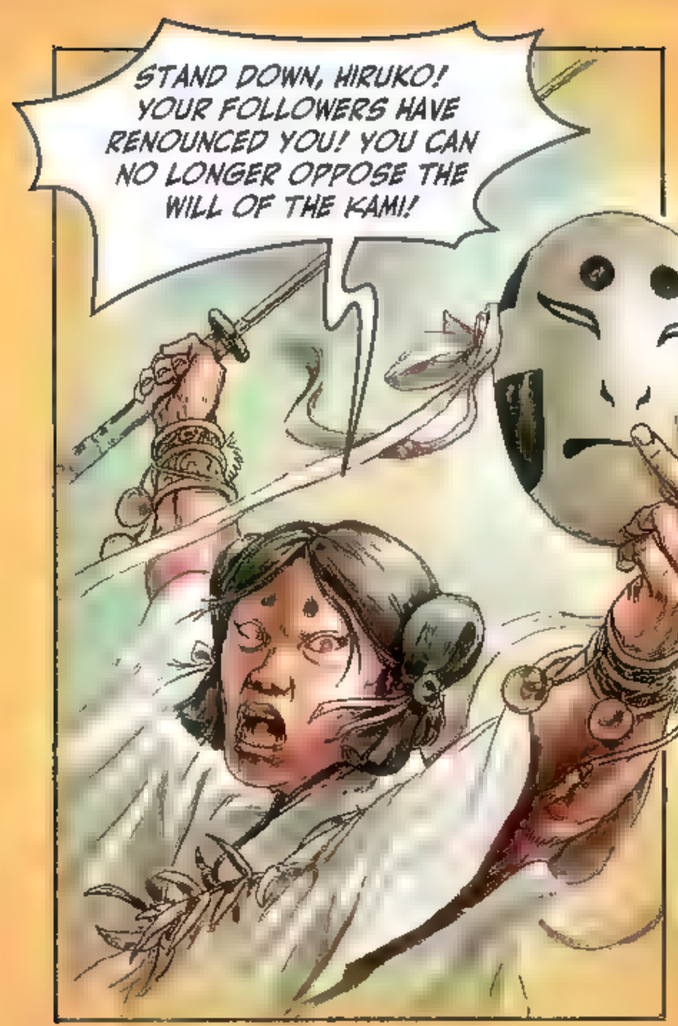
WHY? I BROUGHT YOU FOOD AND PROSPERITY!

IF A SINGLE PARIAH KAMI COULD GIVE US THAT, THEN WE WANT WHAT THE EMPEROR AND THE OTHER KAMI CAN GIVE US!

WE ARE TIRED OF BEING FISHERMEN. WE WANT *MORE!*






STAND DOWN, HIRUKO! YOUR FOLLOWERS HAVE RENOUNCED YOU! YOU CAN NO LONGER OPPOSE THE WILL OF THE KAMI!

I BANISH YOU FROM THIS WORLD! EVEN YOUR NAME WILL BE FORGOTTEN!

CURSES UPON YOU, JINMU TEN'NO!

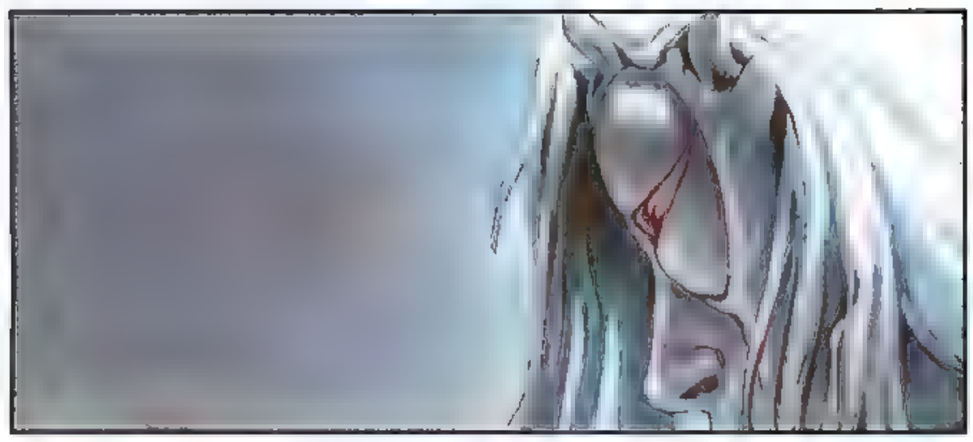
SO BE IT. TAKE THIS WORLD, THEN.

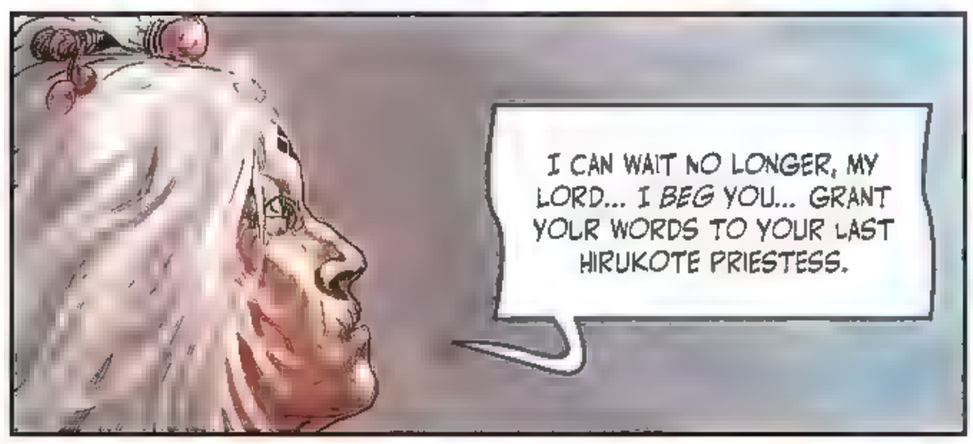
EXILE WILL SPARE ME YOUR REIGN OF ILLUSORY PERFECTION. BUT REMEMBER...
...ONE DAY THE LIBERATOR WILL COME, PROTECTED BY FUDO MYO, THE IMMOVABLE FIRE...
AND IT WILL BE THE END OF YOUR REIGN OF LIES!

I AM THE ETERNAL ERROR OF THE KAMI.
CENTURIES ARE BUT MOMENTS TO ME.

I AM THE HIRUKO!

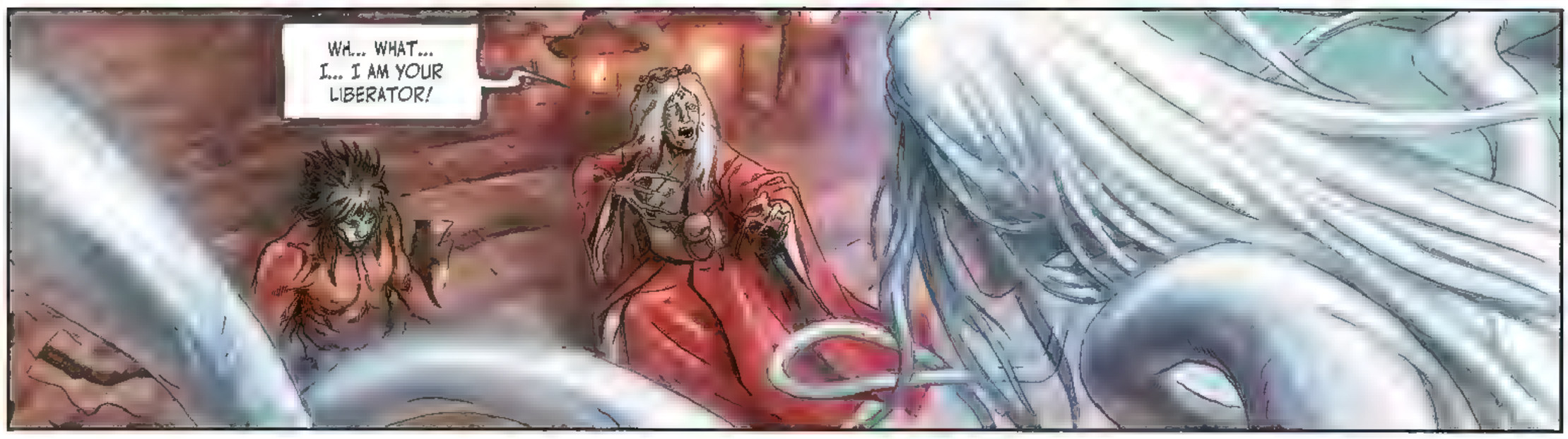
NEVER COULD I HAVE IMAGINED SUCH MAGNIFICENCE...
YESSS...YOUR FLESH WE WELCOME... OUT OF THE NEW WORLD, THE SEED HAS SPROUTED!




I CAN WAIT NO LONGER, MY LORD... I BEG YOU... GRANT YOUR WORDS TO YOUR LAST HIRUKOTE PRIESTESS.

YOU... ARE NOTHING!

YOU AREN'T EVEN WORTHY OF HEARING MY TRUE VOICE, AND YET YOU CLAIM THE RIGHT TO AWAKEN ME BEFORE THE TIME HAS COME!


WH... WHAT... I... I AM YOUR LIBERATOR!

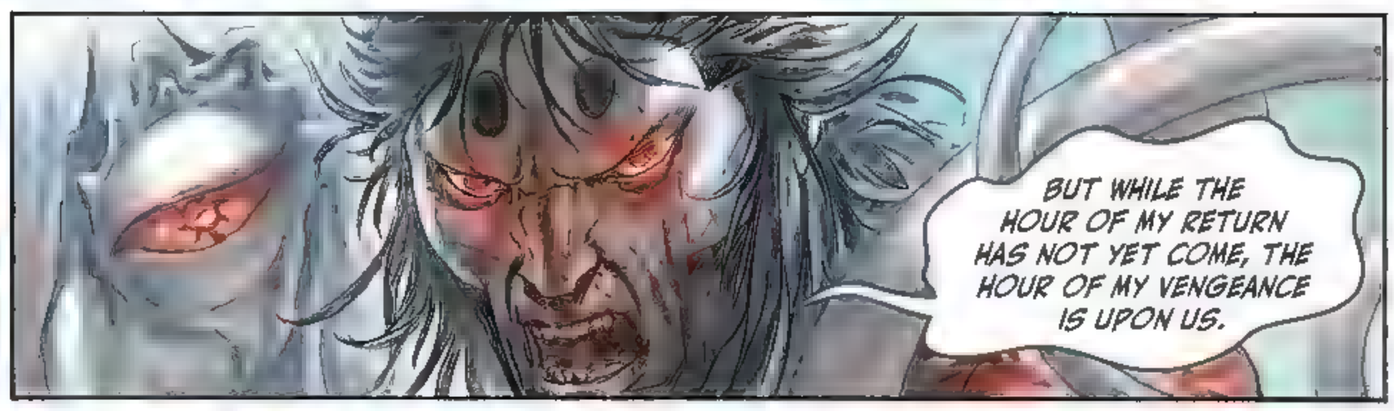
THE LIBERATOR IS NOT YET OF THIS WORLD!

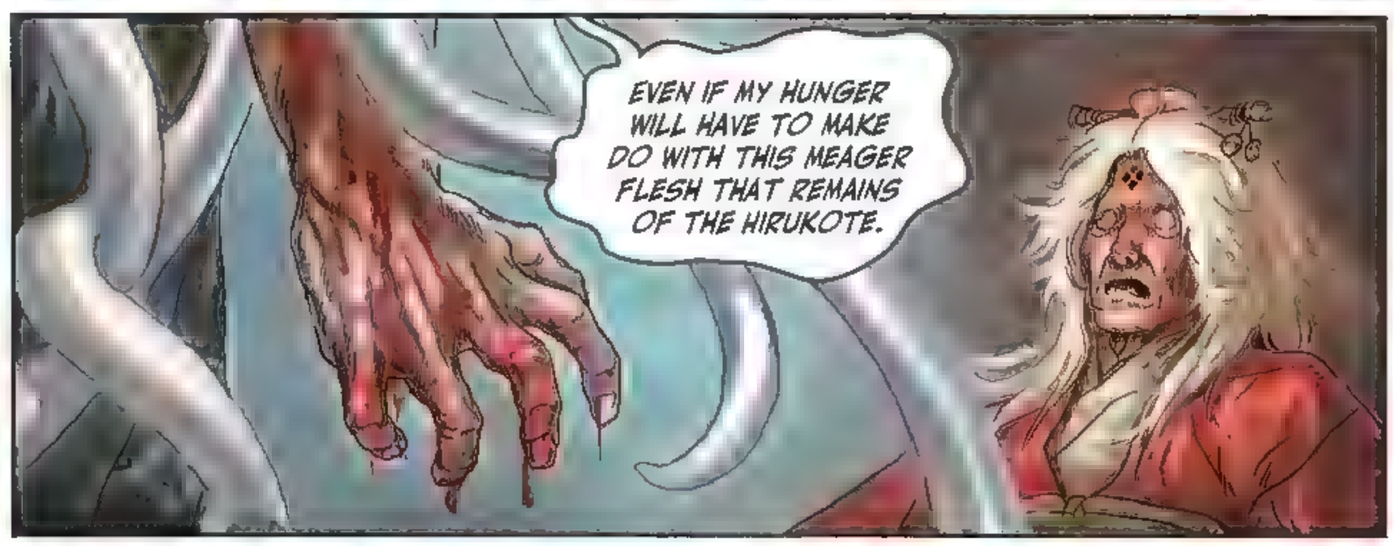
THE HIRUKOTE STOPPED BEING MY BONES WHEN THEY WERE SEDUCED BY VAIN ILLUSIONS...

...EVER SINCE THEY BETRAYED ME FOR EMPEROR JINMU TEN'NO, WHO BANISHED MY FLESH TO OBLIVION.

SOFT, TANGIBLE FLESH... THAT IS ALL I AM.
THE ONE THING THAT CAN NEVER BE TAKEN FROM ME...

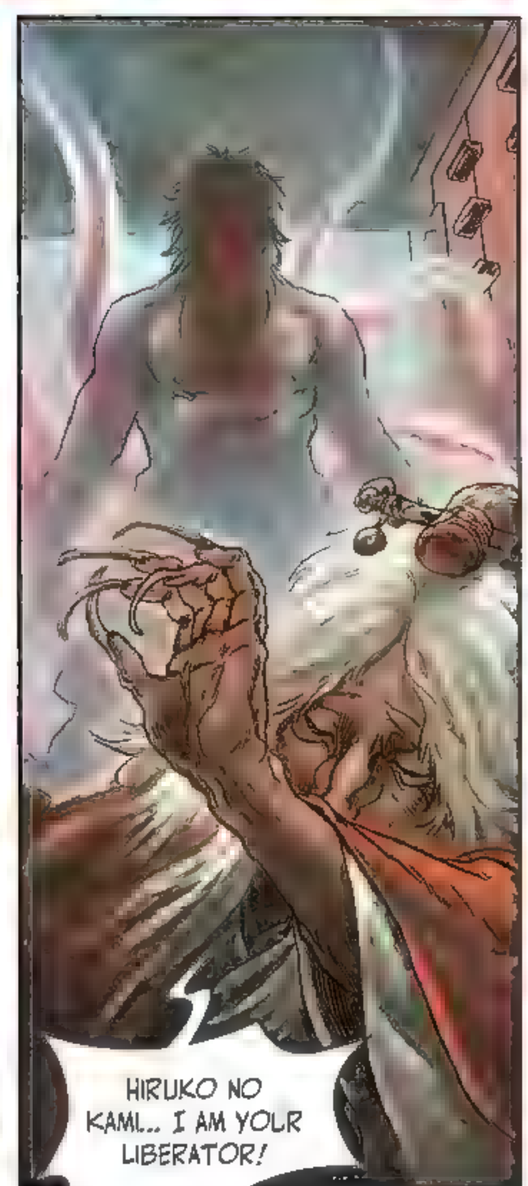
...AND WHICH WILL NEVER BETRAY ME.


BUT WHILE THE HOUR OF MY RETURN HAS NOT YET COME, THE HOUR OF MY VENGEANCE IS UPON US.


EVEN IF MY HUNGER WILL HAVE TO MAKE DO WITH THIS MEAGER FLESH THAT REMAINS OF THE HIRUKOTE.

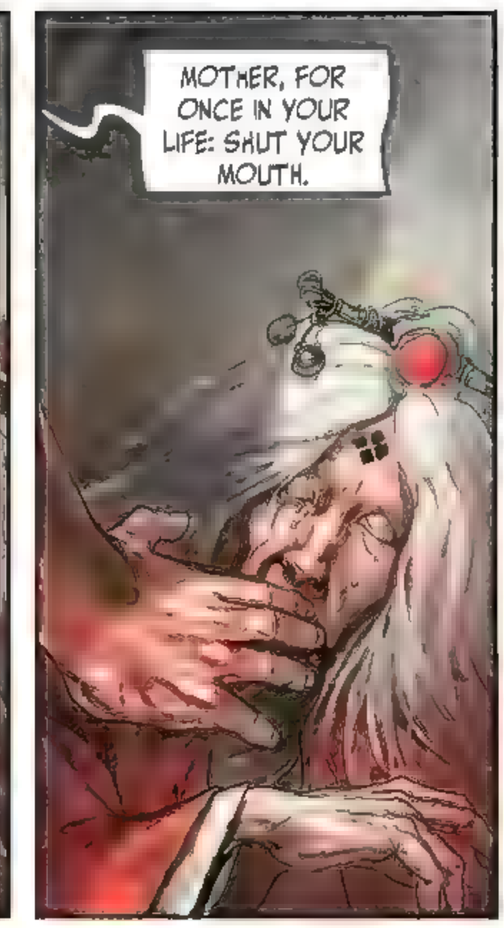
THIS... CANNOT BE! I AM YOUR LAST PRIESTESS!

ALWAYS FAITHFUL! I HAVE NEVER BETRAYED YOU! I AM THE ONE WHO BROUGHT YOU BACK INTO THIS WORLD! ME!

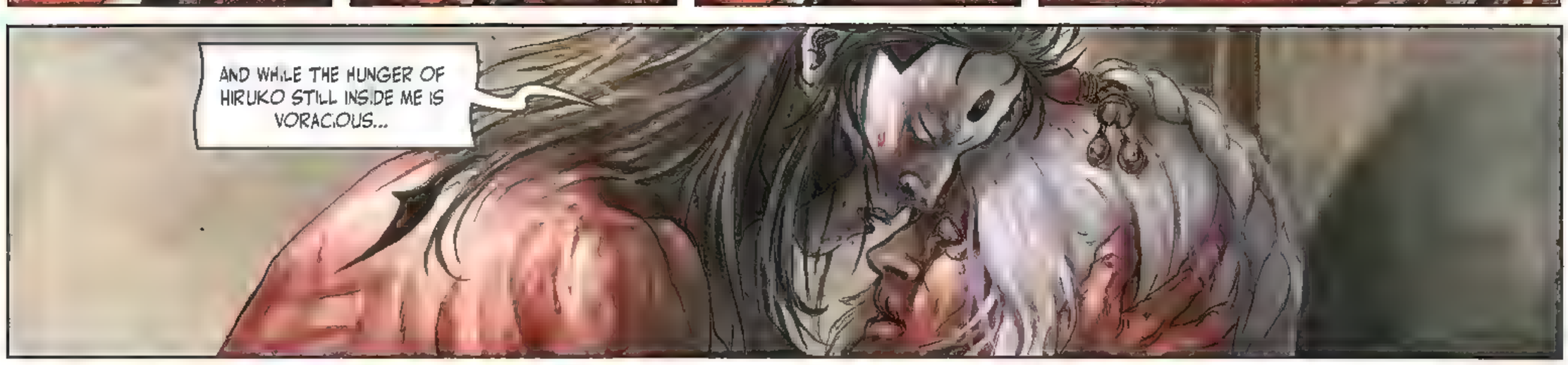

HIRUKO NO KAMI... I AM YOUR LIBERATOR!

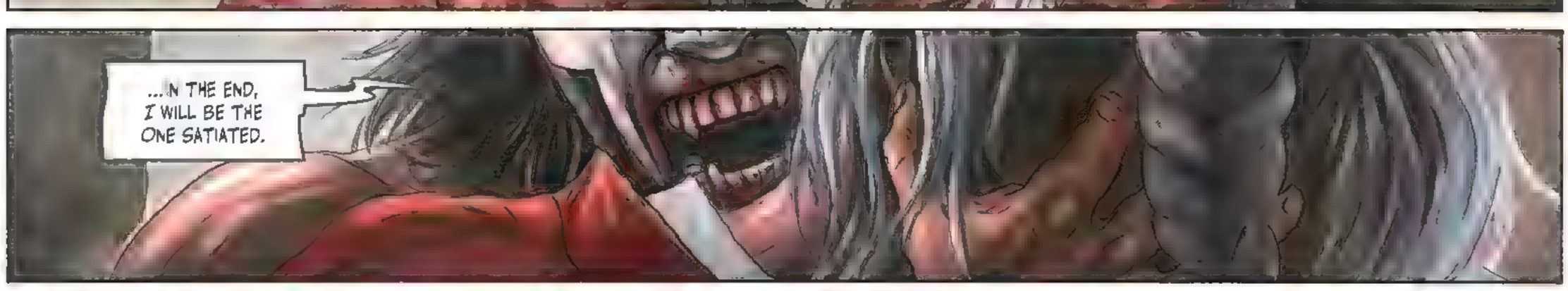
SHINNOSUKE IS MY SON... IT IS ONLY BECAUSE OF ME THAT FUDO EXISTS! HE IS THE PROTECTOR OF THE LAST PRIESTESS! SO SAYETH THE PROPHECY!

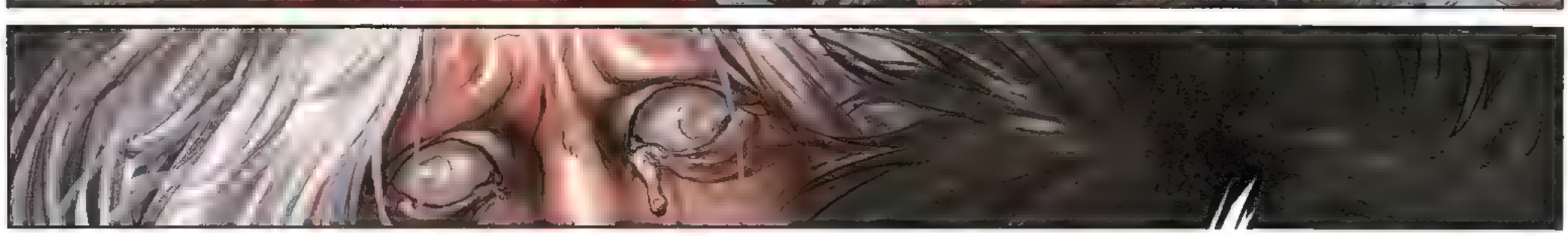
MY PROTECT--

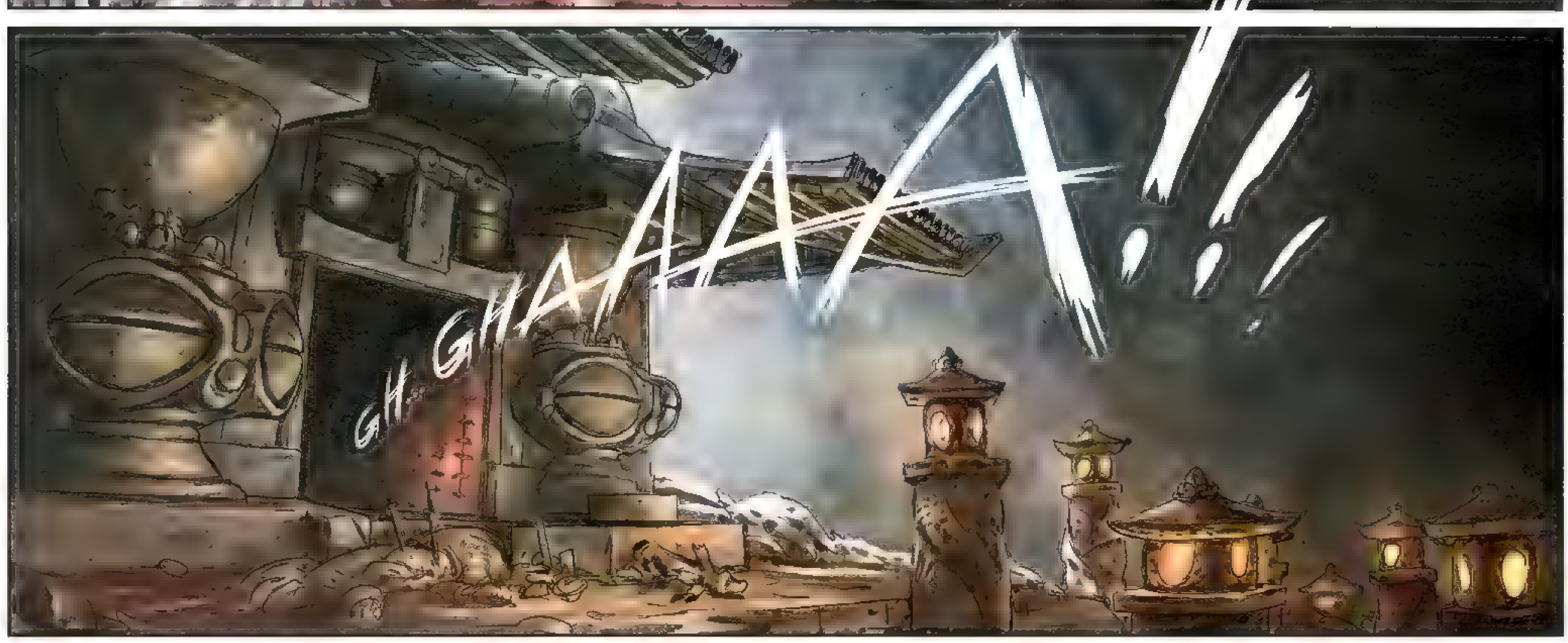

MOTHER, FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIFE: SHUT YOUR MOUTH.

IT IS YOUR SON WHO NOW STANDS BEFORE YOU.

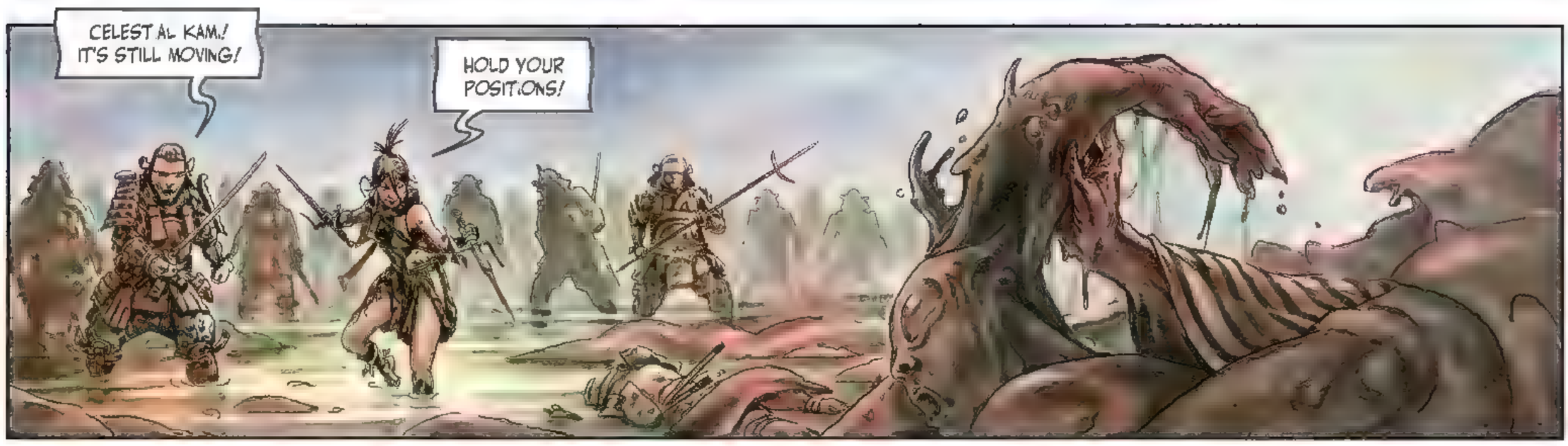

AND WHILE THE HUNGER OF HIRUKO STILL INSIDE ME IS VORACIOUS...

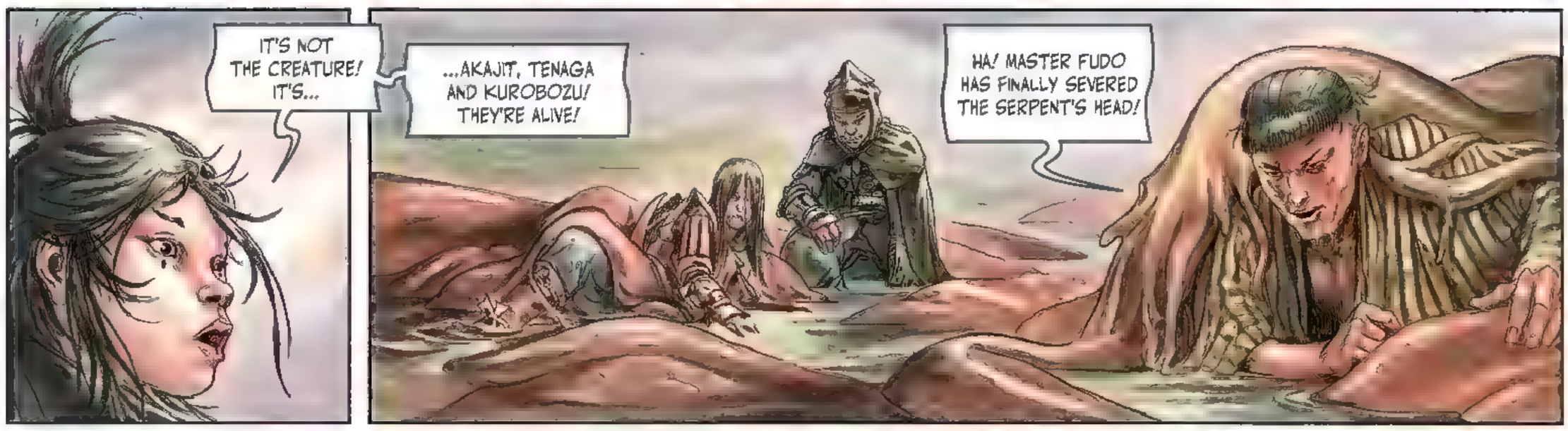

...IN THE END, I WILL BE THE ONE SATIATED.

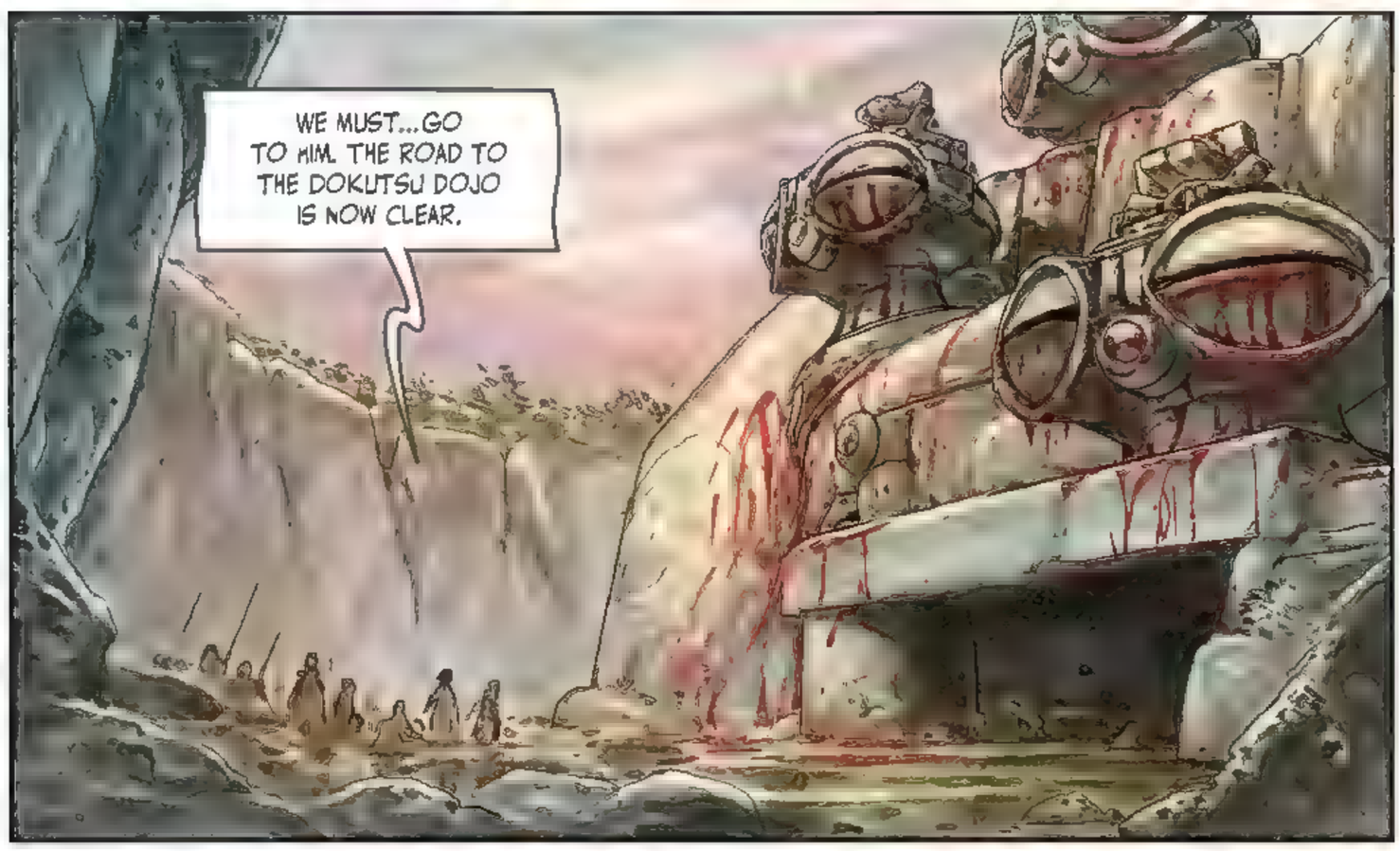



GH-GHAHAH!!!

LOUD AND PIERCING THOUGH THEY WERE, NOBU'S CRIES DID NOT MAKE IT THROUGH THE THICK WALLS OF THE DOKUTSU DOJO.
THEY WERE, HOWEVER, PERCEIVED BY HER REVOLTING CREATURE.
THE HOWL TOOK OVER ITS PUTRID LIMBS JUST IN TIME, BEFORE ALL TRACES OF HUMANITY WERE LOST.
THE CHORUS OF RUMBLING VOICES SUBSIDED IN A TERRIBLE AND PITIFUL DEATH RATTLE...
...NOW DEPRIVED OF THE MYSTICAL FORCES THAT CARRIED IT.
BLOOK
NOBU'S LAST CRIES FADED IN THE CLAMOR OF SILENCE.


CELESTIAL KAMI! IT'S STILL MOVING!
HOLD YOUR POSITIONS!


IT'S NOT THE CREATURE! IT'S...
...AKAJIT, TENAGA AND KUROBOZU! THEY'RE ALIVE!
HA! MASTER FUDO HAS FINALLY SEVERED THE SERPENT'S HEAD!

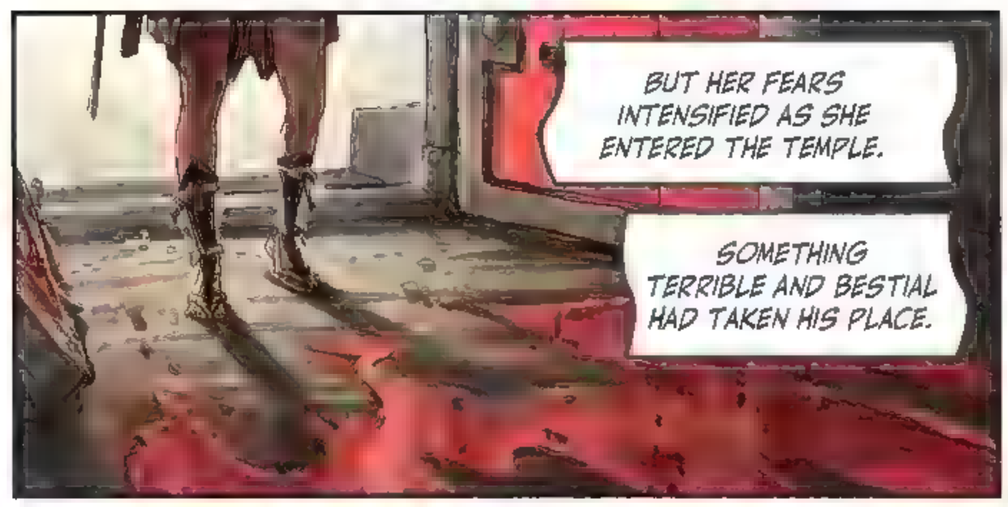

WE MUST...GO TO HIM. THE ROAD TO THE DOKUTSU DOJO IS NOW CLEAR.

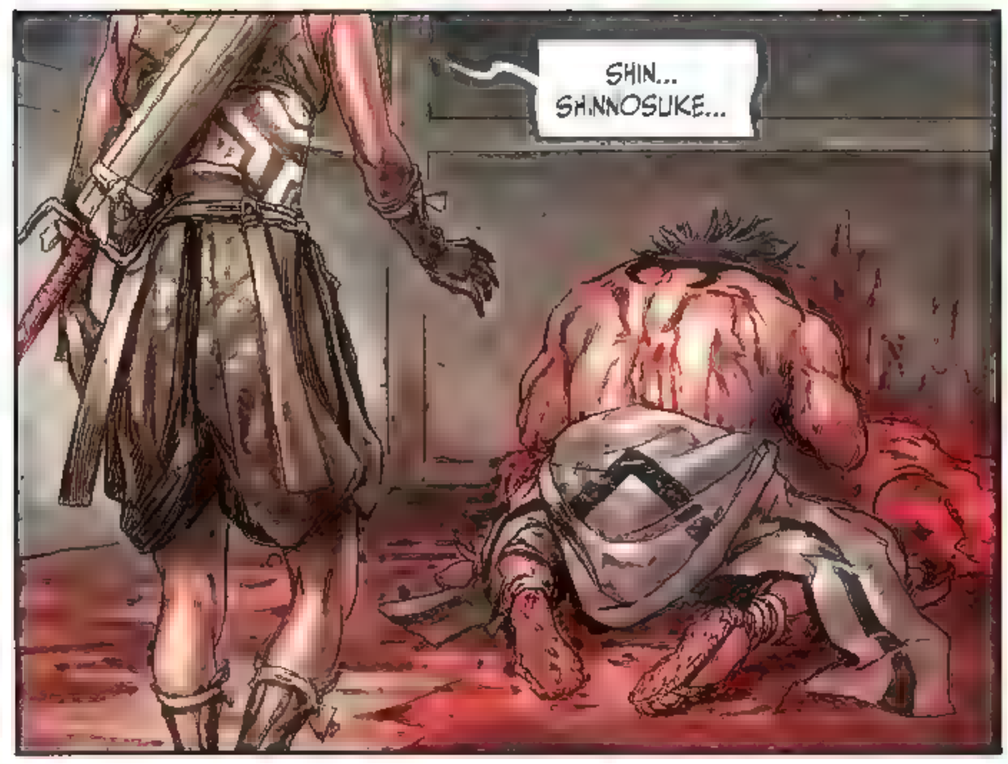
OH NO, NOT YOU. YOU CAN BARELY STAND. KAIDA WILL GO.

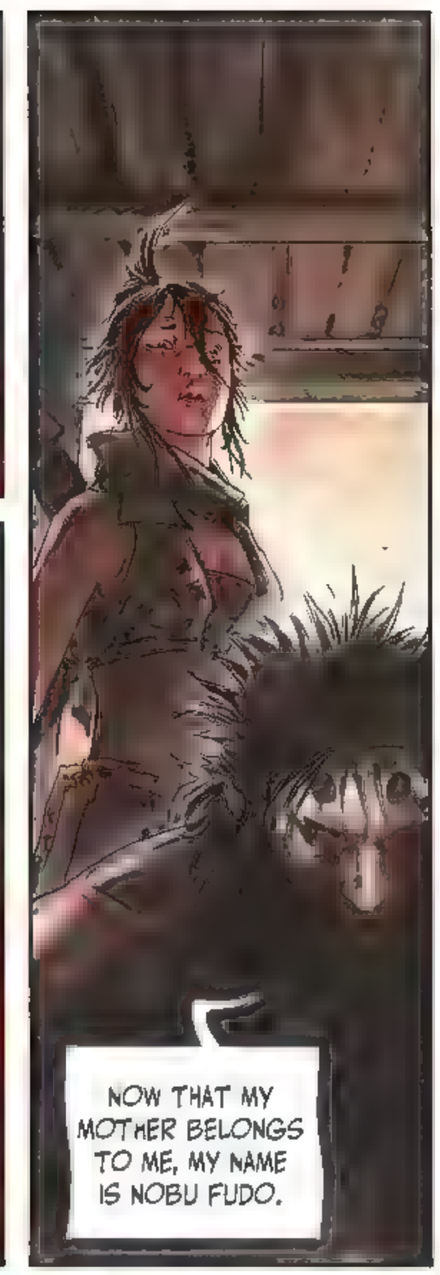
YOU CAN'T LEAVE US HERE!
SORRY, MY FRIENDS, BUT KAIDA STILL HAS SOME BUSINESS TO SETTLE WITH SHIN CHAN AND YOU WOULD GET IN OUR WAY.

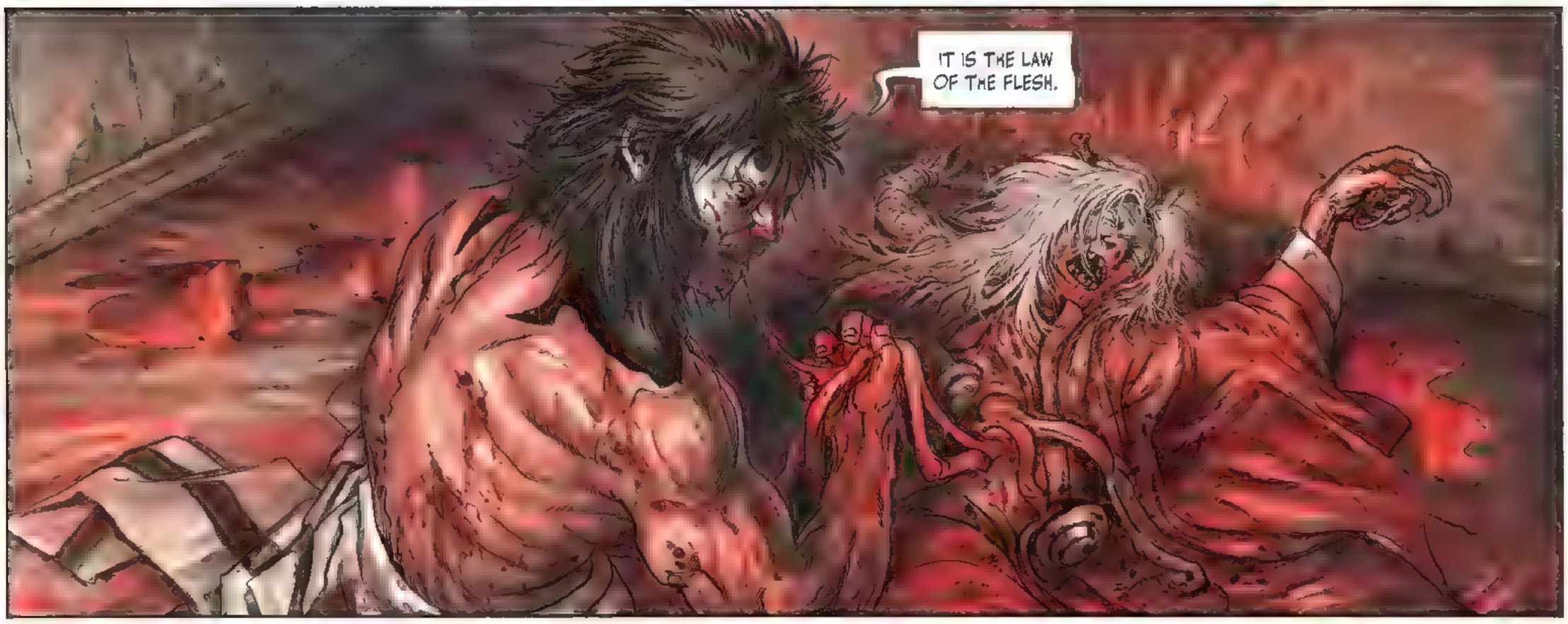
STOP, YOU CURSED MADWOMAN!

THE LAST TIME KAIDA HAD SEEN SHINNOSUKE, HE HAD NOT BEEN HIMSELF. HE HAD BEHELD HIS DEAD SISTER AND CHANGED INTO FUDO ONCE AND FOR ALL.
THOUGH THAT HAD ALWAYS BEEN KAIDA'S OBJECTIVE, SHE HOPED THAT SHINNOSUKE HADN'T COMPLETELY DISAPPEARED.

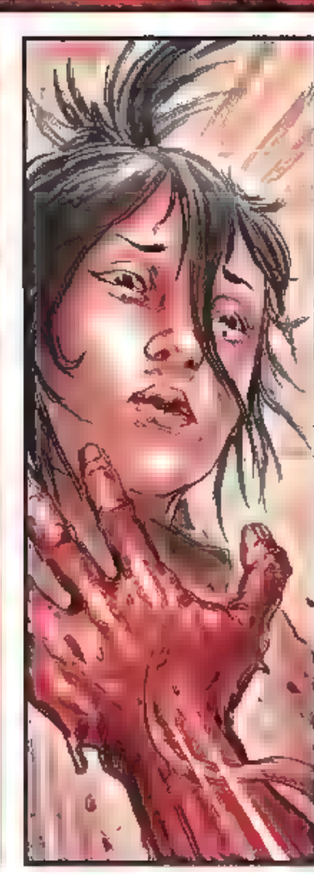

BUT HER FEARS INTENSIFIED AS SHE ENTERED THE TEMPLE.
SOMETHING TERRIBLE AND BESTIAL HAD TAKEN HIS PLACE.


SHIN... SHINNOSUKE...


NOW THAT MY MOTHER BELONGS TO ME, MY NAME IS NOBU FUDO.

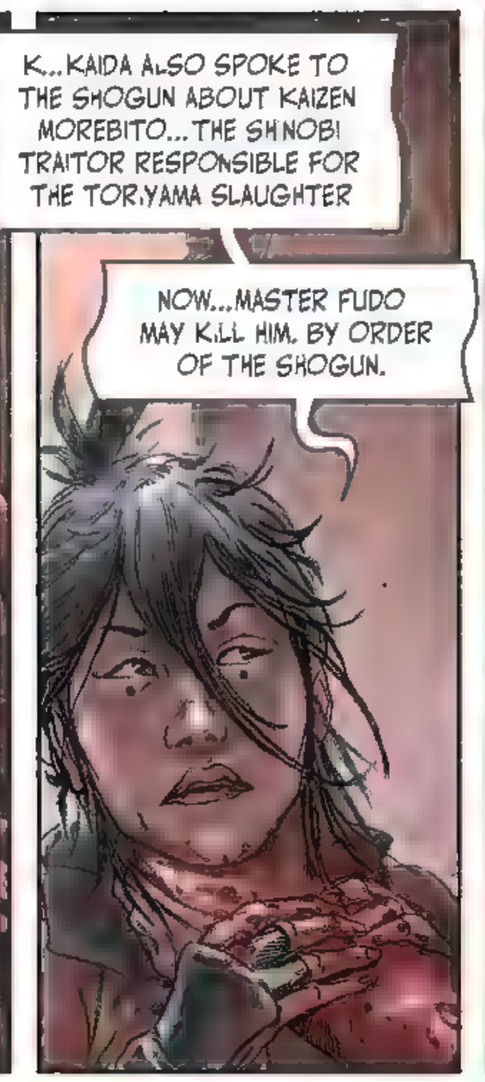

IT IS THE LAW OF THE FLESH.

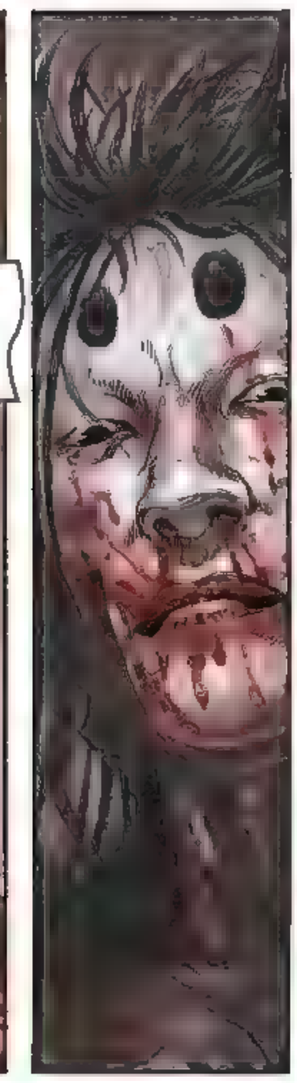
MASTER FUDO IS OVERWHELMED... ALL IS WELL. KAIDA IS HERE FOR HIM.
K...KAIDA?

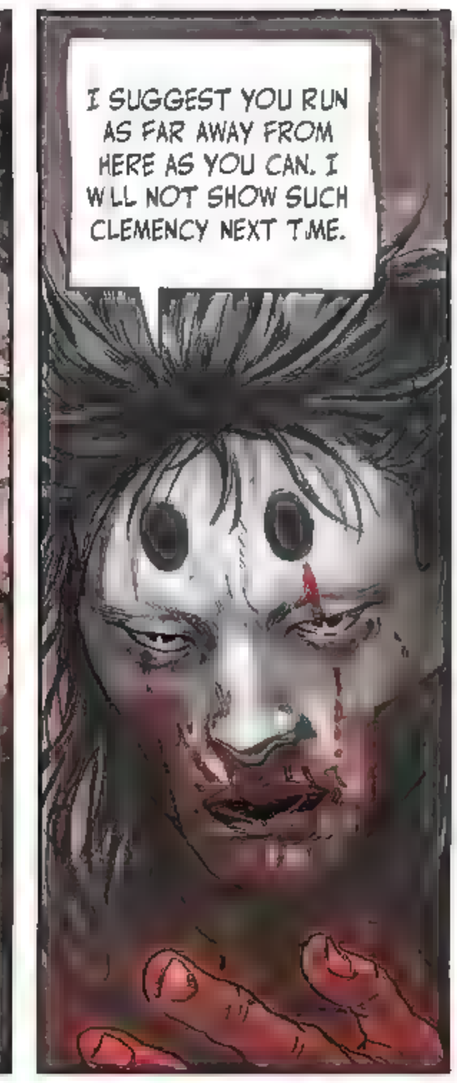


I COULD...BREAK YOUR NECK WITH A SINGLE SQUEEZE.

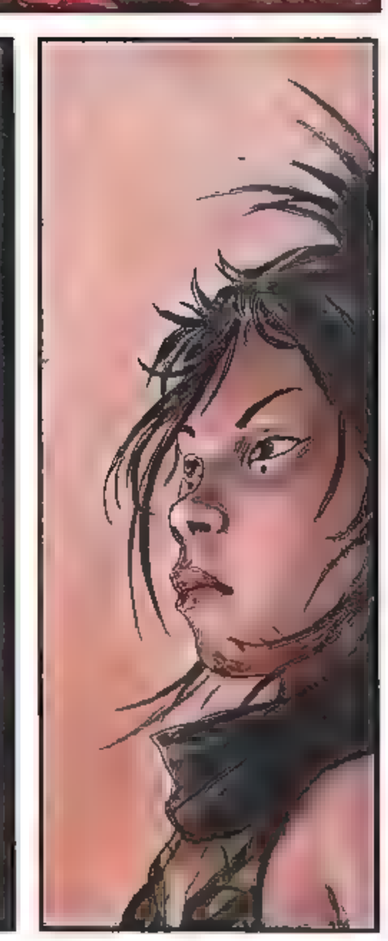
FUDO-SAMA, WE BOW BEFORE YOUR VICTORY. TOTEKU FUJIWARA WILL BE DELIGHTED TO LEARN YOU HAVE DEFEATED THE ANCIENT TERROR.
KNOW THAT THE SHOGUN WILL SUMMON YOU VERY SOON.


K...KAIDA ALSO SPOKE TO THE SHOGUN ABOUT KAIZEN MOREBITO...THE SHINOBI TRAITOR RESPONSIBLE FOR THE TORIYAMA SLAUGHTER
NOW...MASTER FUDO MAY KILL HIM, BY ORDER OF THE SHOGUN.

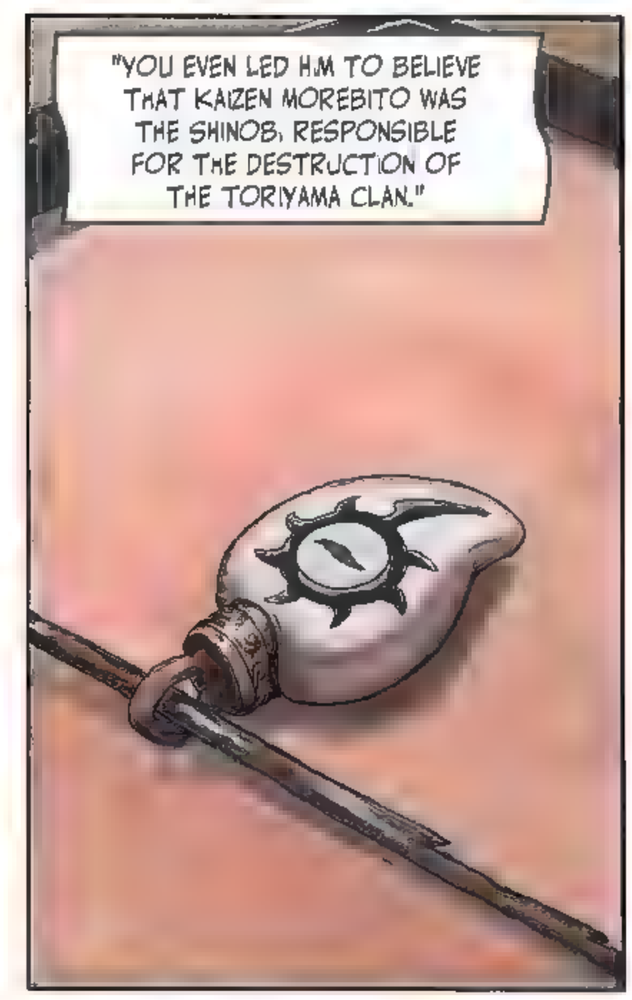



I SUGGEST YOU RUN AS FAR AWAY FROM HERE AS YOU CAN. I WILL NOT SHOW SUCH CLEMENCY NEXT TIME.

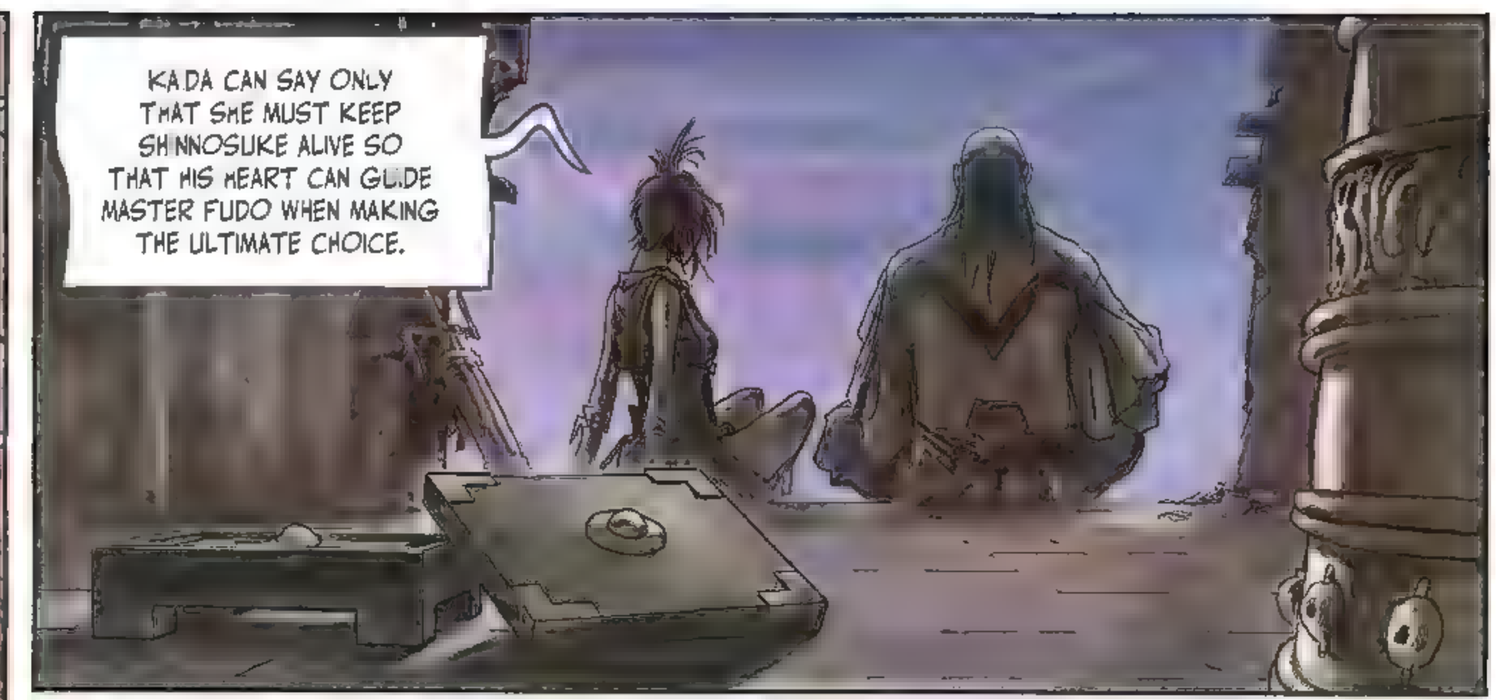
TELL TOTEKU FUJIWARA-SAMA THAT I WILL SOON BE AT HIS SIDE.
JUST AS SOON AS I RESTORE ORDER TO THIS PLACE.

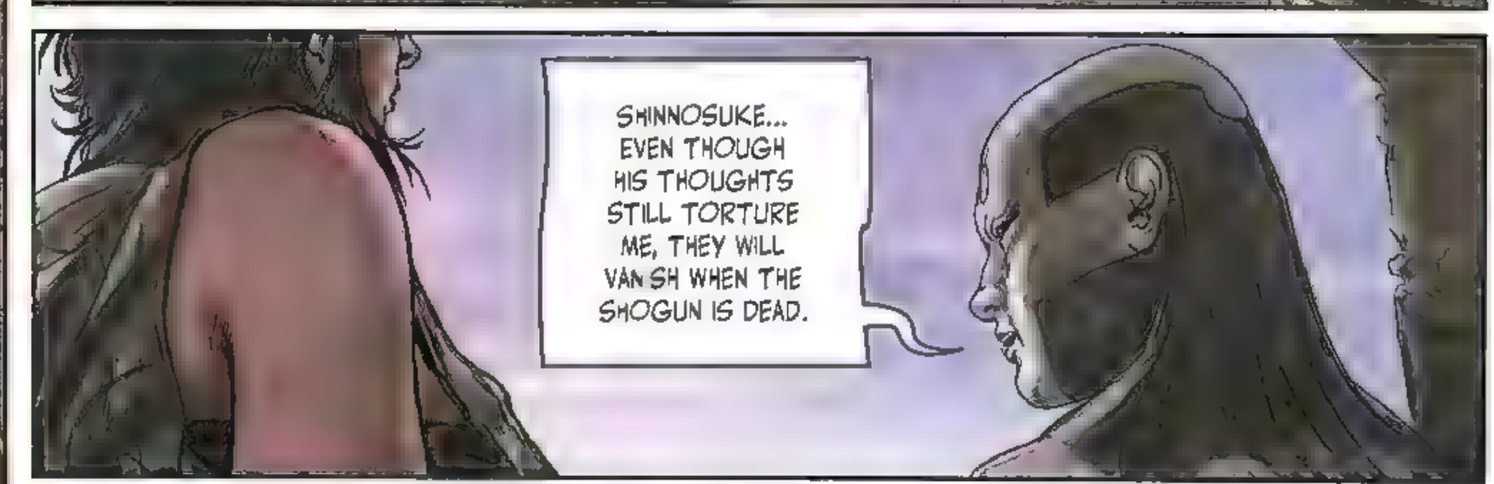


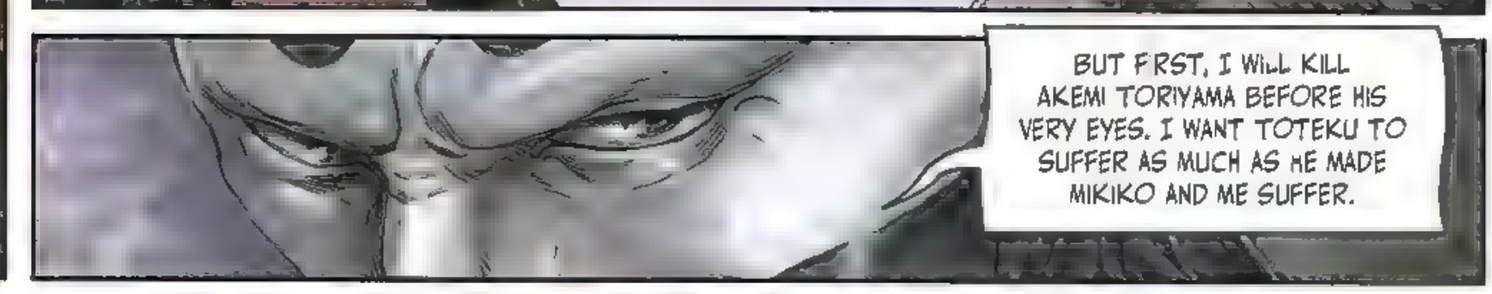
"YOU KNEW THAT AFTER MY MOTHER'S DEATH, THE SHOGUN WOULD INVITE ME TO HIS NUPTIALS.


"YOU EVEN LED HIM TO BELIEVE THAT KAIZEN MOREBITO WAS THE SHINOBI RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TORIYAMA CLAN."

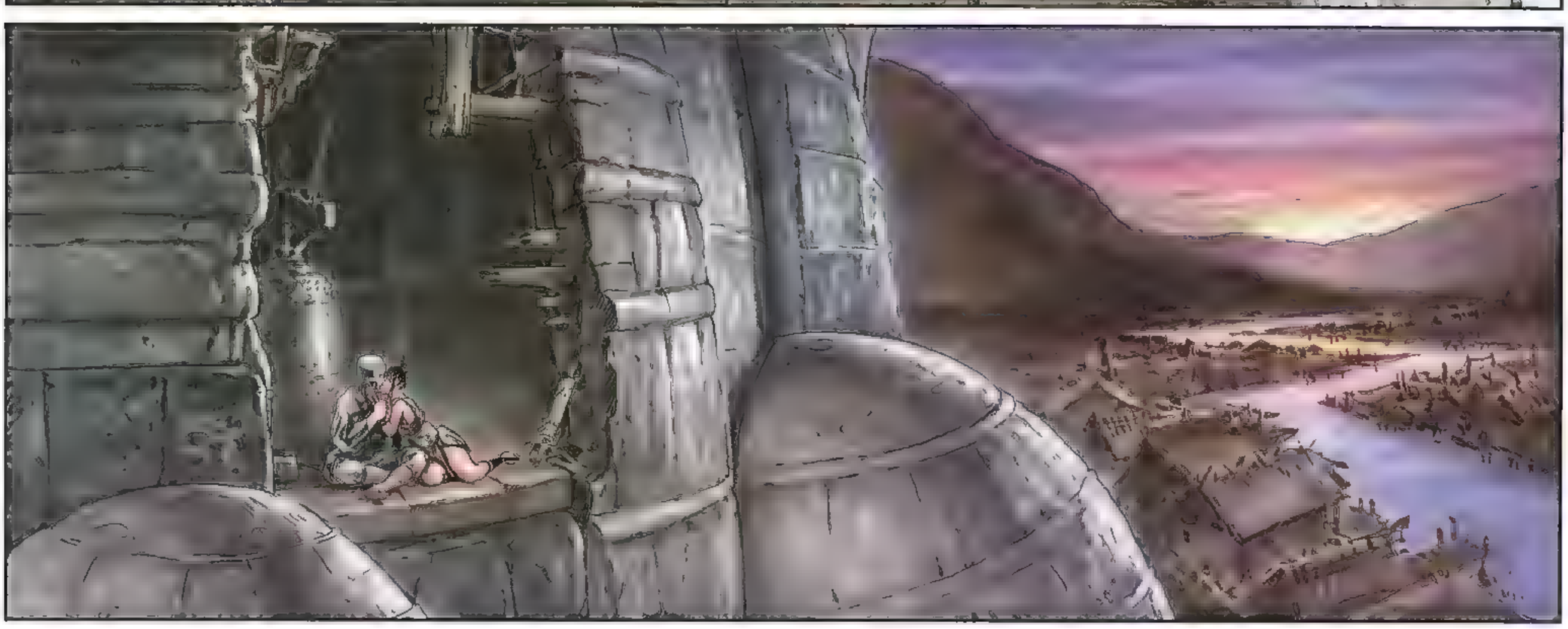
KAIDA THOUGHT MASTER FUDO WOULD REJOICE...WAS IT NOT KAIZEN WHO FIRST TOOK MIKIKO?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK ANYMORE. YOU SCHEMED SO THAT I COULD EXACT MY REVENGE UPON KAIZEN, BUT NOW IT SEEMS YOU WISH TO PROTECT THE SHOGUN.


KADA CAN SAY ONLY THAT SHE MUST KEEP SHINNOSUKE ALIVE SO THAT HIS HEART CAN GUIDE MASTER FUDO WHEN MAKING THE ULTIMATE CHOICE.


SHINNOSUKE... EVEN THOUGH HIS THOUGHTS STILL TORTURE ME, THEY WILL VANISH WHEN THE SHOGUN IS DEAD.


BUT FIRST, I WILL KILL AKEMI TORIYAMA BEFORE HIS VERY EYES. I WANT TOTEKU TO SUFFER AS MUCH AS HE MADE MIKIKO AND ME SUFFER.

AFTER THAT...IF YOU WANT, WE CAN RUN AWAY FAR FROM ALL OF THIS...TOGETHER.
SILLY KAIDA, SHE SHOULDN'T FALL IN LOVE... NOT WITH SHIN-CHAN.



KAIDA ALWAYS HOPES THAT THE LIGHT OF DAWN WILL DISPERSE THE SHADOWS OF THE PAST.

BUT SHE WANTS TO REMEMBER THIS NIGHT, EVEN THOUGH IT SADDENS KAIDA.
FOR WHATEVER MASTER FUDO DOES, THIS NIGHT TOGETHER WILL BE THEIR LAST.
KAIDA...

FUDO IS MISTAKEN. SHINNOSUKE IS STILL HERE, AND HE IS STRONG! KAIDA CAN SEE IT IN HIS EYES.
AND GIVEN ALL THE LIES KAIDA HAS TOLD...HER LOVE IS THE ONE THING SHINNOSUKE CAN BELIEVE.

THE...NETSUKE.

FUDO WAS LEFT YET AGAIN WITHOUT ANSWERS, PONDERING THE GREAT VOID THAT AWAITED HIM ONCE HE WOULD EXACT HIS REVENGE.
A VOID THAT ONLY KAIDA COULD HAVE FILLED.

SPRING IN THE YEAR 283 OF THE BAKUFU FUJIWARA IN THE SHIRANUI ERA. THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT ABOVE THE FESTIVE CROWD DURING THE NUPTIALS OF TOTEKU FUJIWARA AND AKEMI TORIYAMA.

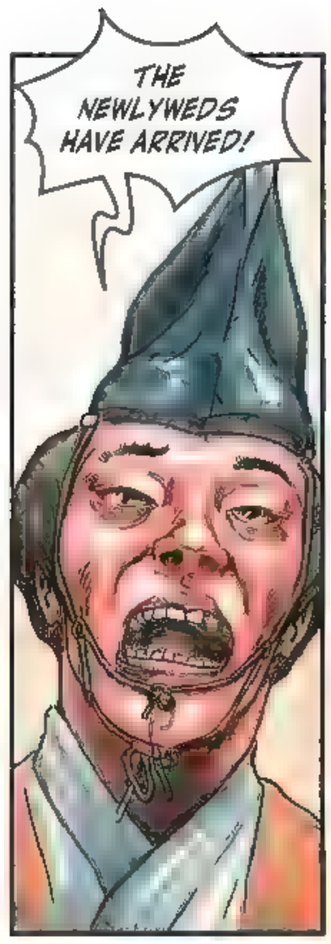
THE DEAFENING NOISE, HOWEVER, DOESN'T REACH THE HIGH WALLS SURROUNDING THE SHOGUN'S PALACE, IN WHICH THE CEREMONY TOOK PLACE.

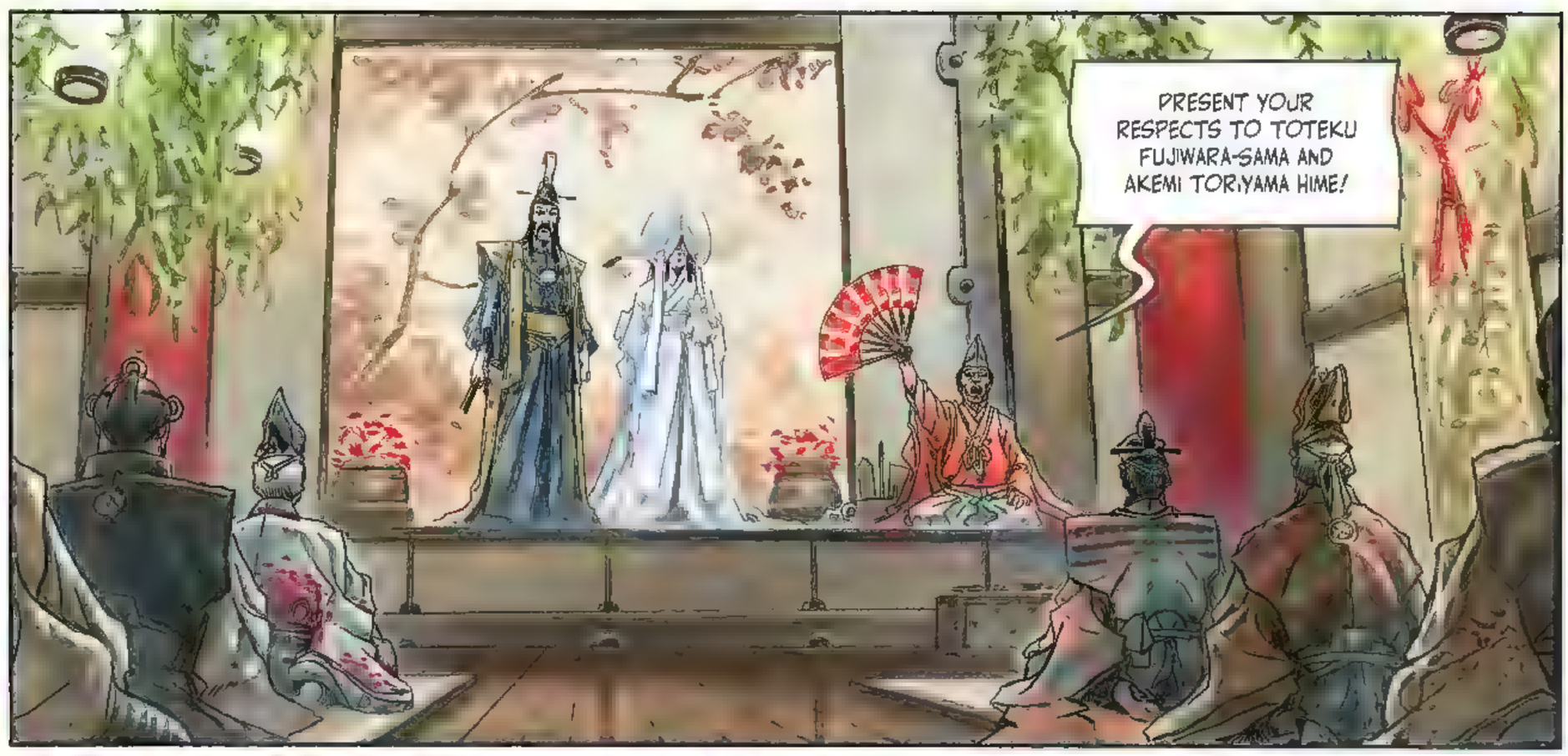
THE SOUNDS OVERLAPPED, BUT ONLY AN OMNIPRESENT ONLOOKER WOULD HAVE BEEN PRIVY TO THE CONTRADICTION.

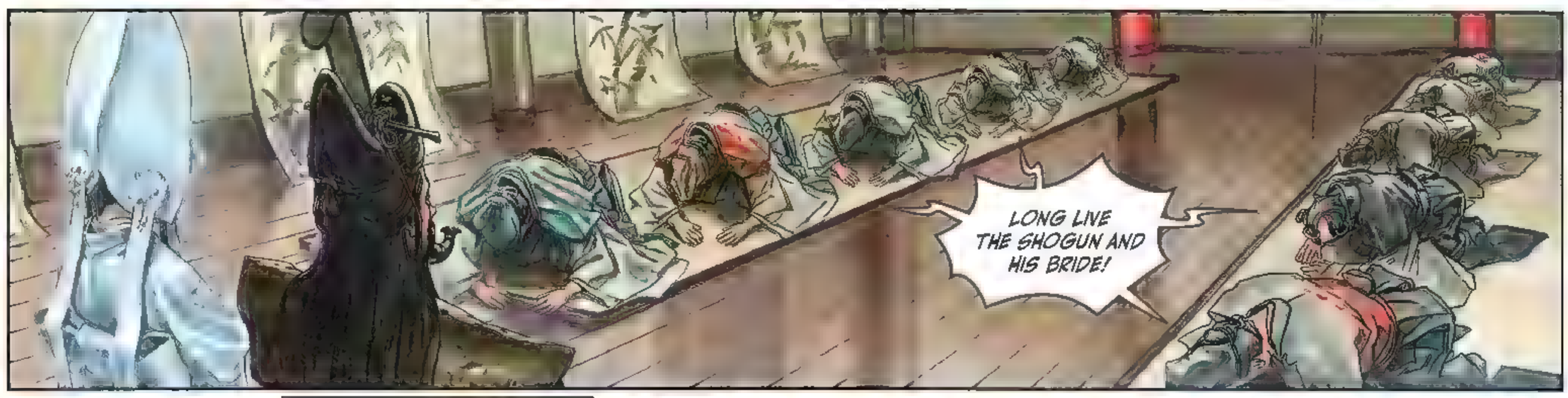
THESE ARE NUPTIALS BLESSED BY THE KAMI TO GUARANTEE THE SHOGUN WILL HAVE DESCENDANTS...

...AND ENSURE THE ONGOING BAKUFU, THE SECRET AND SACRILEGIOUS PRISON OF THE IMMORTAL EMPEROR.

AFTER THE CEREMONY, THE NEWLYWEDS ADJOURN TO THE RECEPTION HALL IN A POWERFUL, SURREAL SILENCE.


THE NEWLYWEDS HAVE ARRIVED!


PRESENT YOUR RESPECTS TO TOTEKU FUJIWARA-SAMA AND AKEMI TORIYAMA HIME!


LONG LIVE THE SHOGUN AND HIS BRIDE!

IT IS AN HONOR TO SEE THE DAIMYOS OF THE MOST POWERFUL CLANS GATHERED HERE TO CELEBRATE THIS DAY.

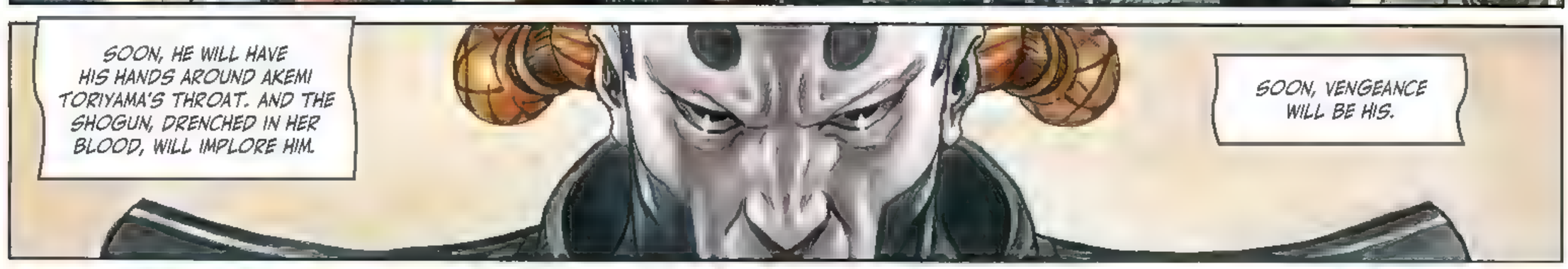
THESE NUPTIALS WILL SEAL A NEW BEGINNING, WHICH SHOULD CLEAR AWAY ALL SHADOWS SO THAT IN THE FUTURE YOUR HONORABLE JUDGMENTS WILL NO LONGER BE CLOUDED.
AMONG US HERE TODAY IS A MAN WHO DEFEATED AN ANCIENT TERROR THAT THREATENED OUR LAND, THEREBY PROVING HIMSELF FULLY WORTHY OF MY TRUST.

A MAN NOBLE IN SOUL IF NOT IN TITLE, BUT WHO, FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, WILL BE THE SHOGUN'S FIRST GENERAL AND SAMURAI.

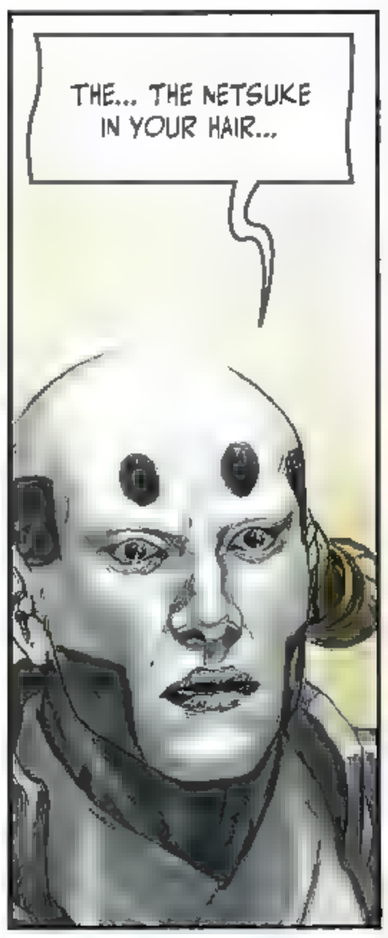
NOBLE NOBU FUDO OF THE DOKUTSU CLAN, YOU MAY NOW APPROACH.

THE FIRE RAGES, BUT FUDO, WITH GREAT EFFORT, MANAGES TO SUPPRESS IT.

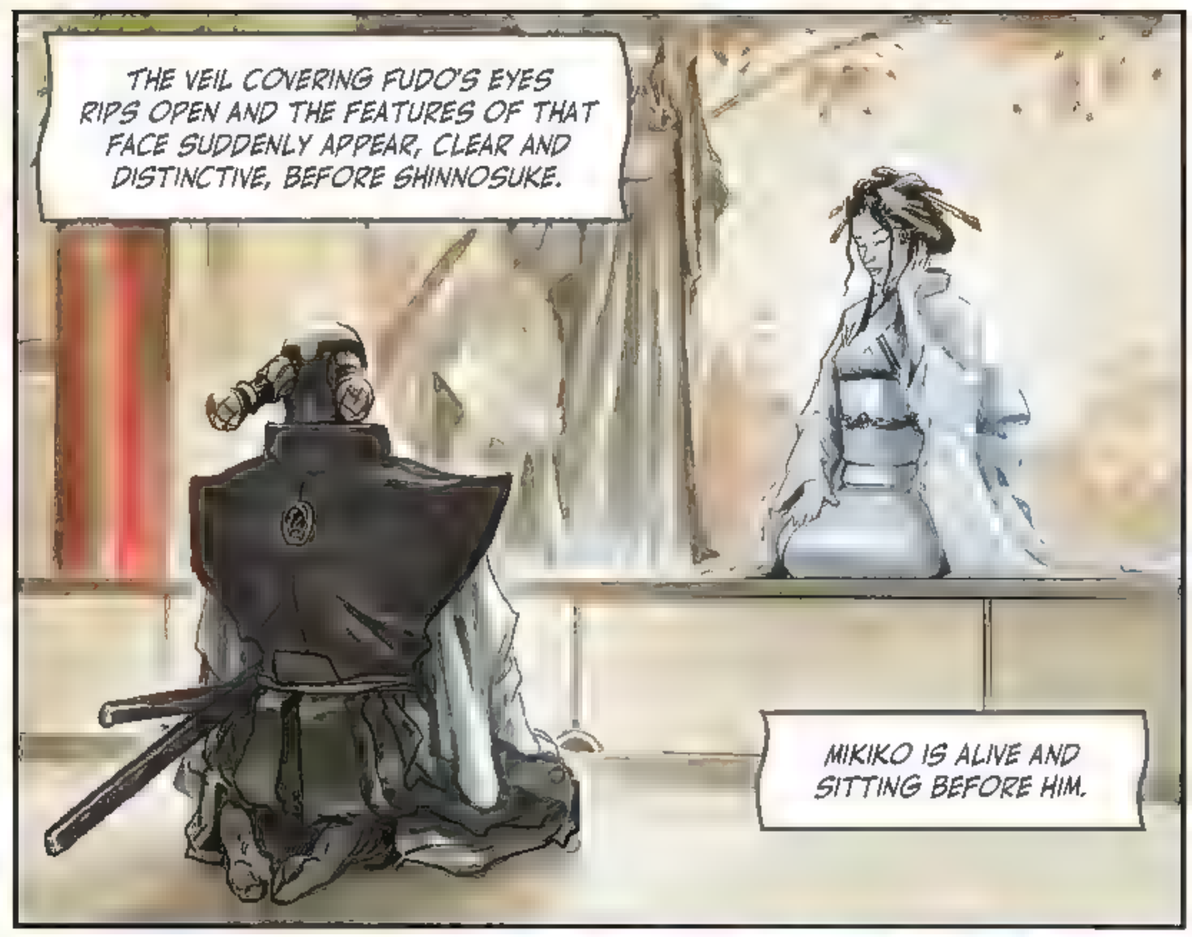
HE LOOKS OUTWARDLY CALM AS HE APPROACHES, WITH NO REGARD FOR THE DAIMYOS, WHO TAKE OFFENSE AND MUMBLE THEIR DISAPPROVAL.
THE DOKUTSU DOJO? THAT LAIR OF MURDERERS?
THIS IS AN OUTRAGE.
WHY HAS HE PAINTED HIS FACE?

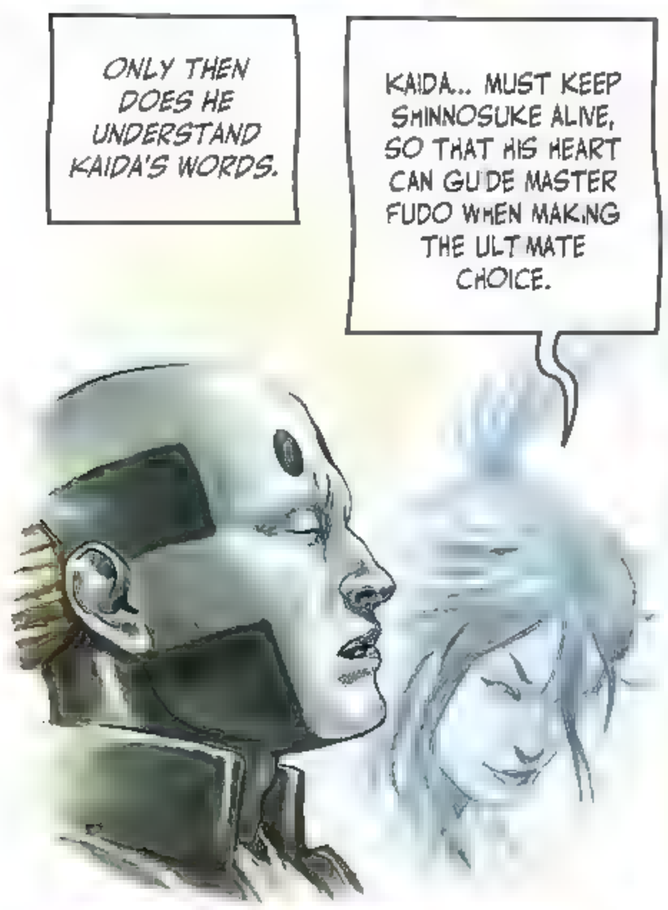

SOON, HE WILL HAVE HIS HANDS AROUND AKEMI TORIYAMA'S THROAT. AND THE SHOGUN, DRENCHED IN HER BLOOD, WILL IMPLORE HIM.
SOON, VENGEANCE WILL BE HIS.

NOBLE FUDO, YOU WILL HAVE THE HONOR OF BEING THE FIRST TO LAY EYES UPON MY BRIDE.
MAY THE PURITY OF HER FACE BECOME THE SYMBOL OF THE BRIGHT FUTURE THAT AWAITS US.


THE... THE NETSUKE IN YOUR HAIR...

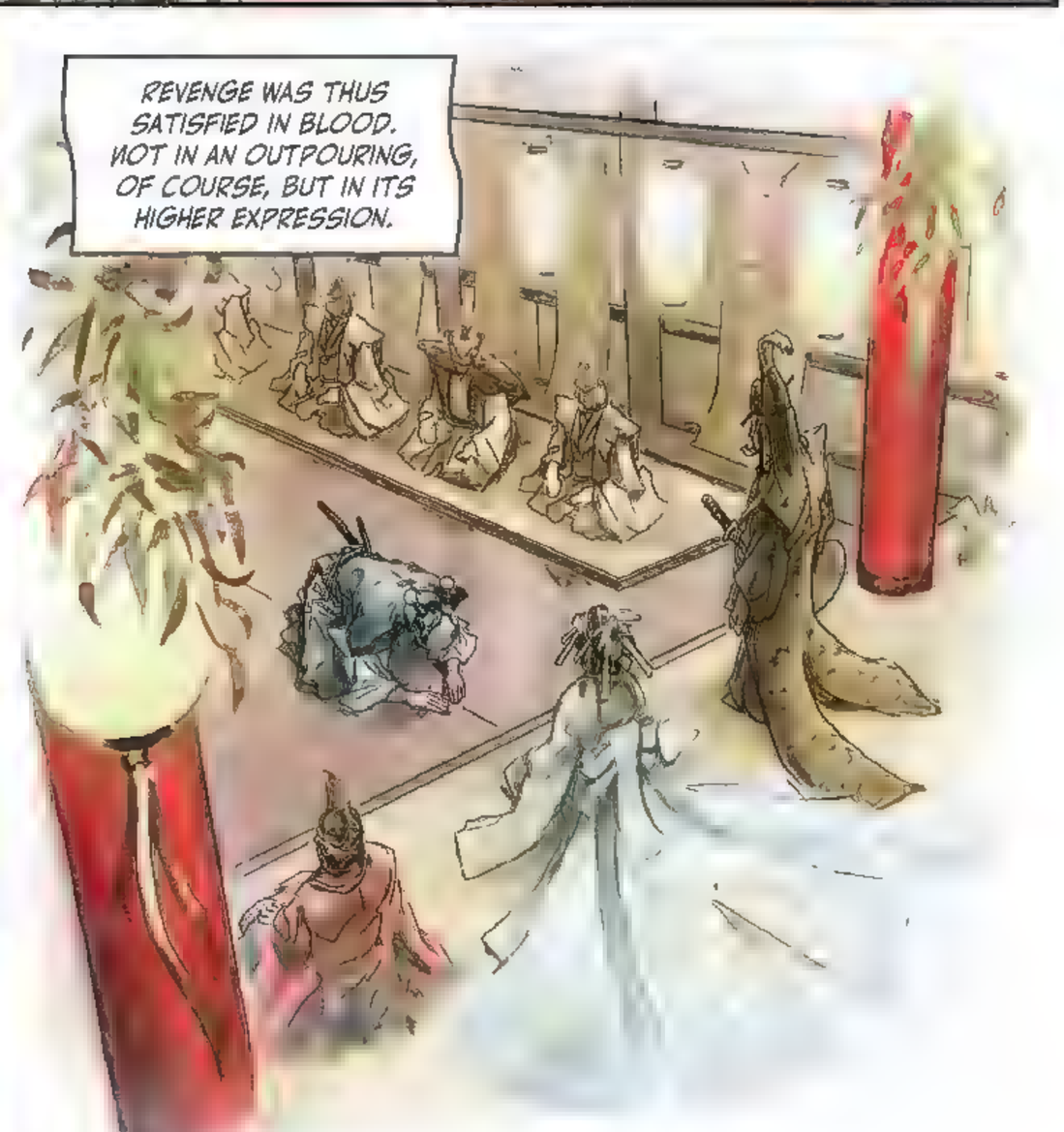
OH, YOU'VE NOTICED IT. IT'S PRETTY, IS IT NOT? ALAS, TRY AS I MIGHT, I AM UNABLE TO REMEMBER WHO GAVE IT TO ME. I THOUGHT I HAD LOST IT, BUT KAIDA-SAN BROUGHT IT BACK TO ME.


THE VEIL COVERING FUDO'S EYES RIPS OPEN AND THE FEATURES OF THAT FACE SUDDENLY APPEAR, CLEAR AND DISTINCTIVE, BEFORE SHINNOSUKE.
MIKIKO IS ALIVE AND SITTING BEFORE HIM.


ONLY THEN DOES HE UNDERSTAND KAIDA'S WORDS.
KAIDA... MUST KEEP SHINNOSUKE ALIVE, SO THAT HIS HEART CAN GUIDE MASTER FUDO WHEN MAKING THE ULTIMATE CHOICE.

THE PERSON WHO GAVE YOU THAT GIFT MUST HAVE... CARED DEEPLY FOR YOU...
I HOPE...ONE DAY... YOU WILL REMEMBER WHO IT WAS.

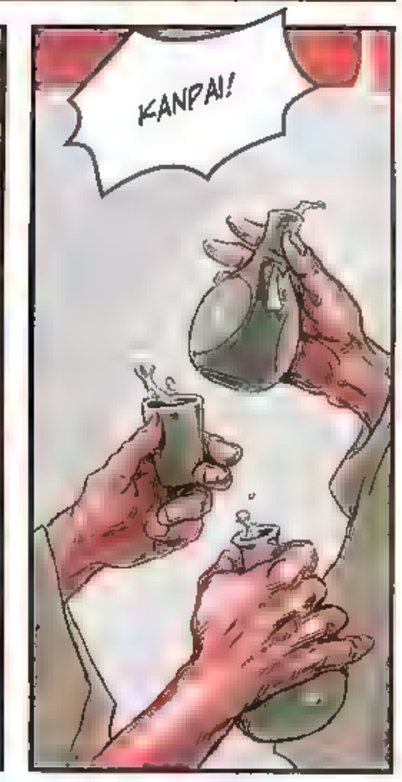
MAY MY DEVOTION BE JUST AS PRECIOUS A GIFT TO YOU.

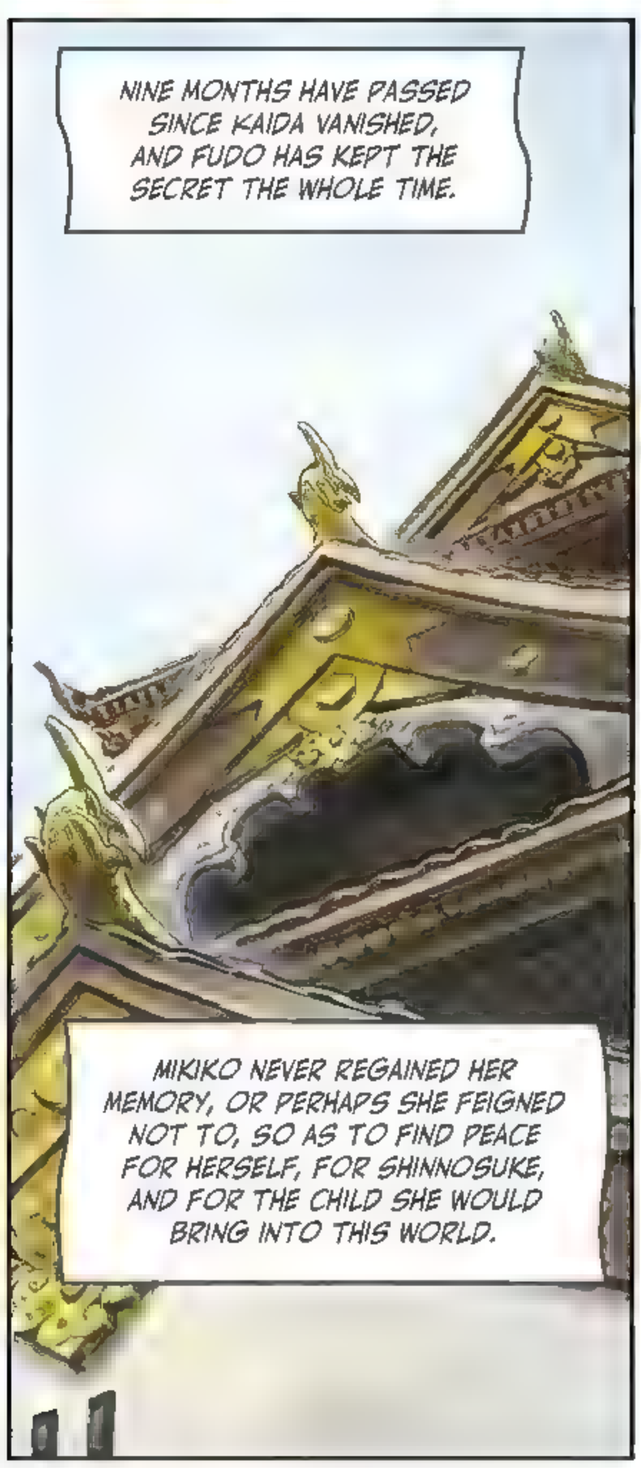

REVENGE WAS THUS SATISFIED IN BLOOD. NOT IN AN OUTPOURING, OF COURSE, BUT IN ITS HIGHER EXPRESSION.

TIME FLIES WHEN THERE IS PEACE IN THE LAND. NINE MONTHS HAVE ALREADY PASSED SINCE THE SHOGUN'S NUPTIALS, AND THE PEOPLE CAN BARELY CONTAIN THEIR EXCITEMENT.
HEAR YE, HEAR YE! THEY HAVE JUST ANNOUNCED THAT AKEMI FUJIWARA HAS GIVEN BIRTH!

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT THIS VIOLENT STORM WOULD BE SUCH A GOOD OMEN FOR THE SHOGUN?
HEY, PAL! IT ALSO MARKED THE BEGINNING OF OUR FRIENDSHIP!

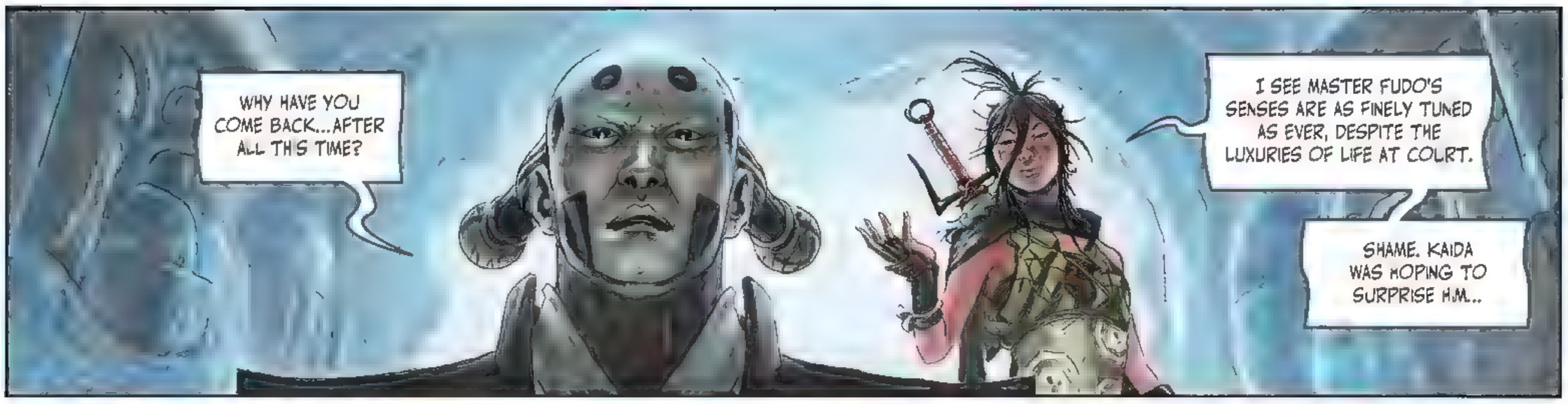
BUT YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW MY NAME!
AFTER A FEW MORE ROUNDS, NEITHER WILL YOU! HA HA HA!

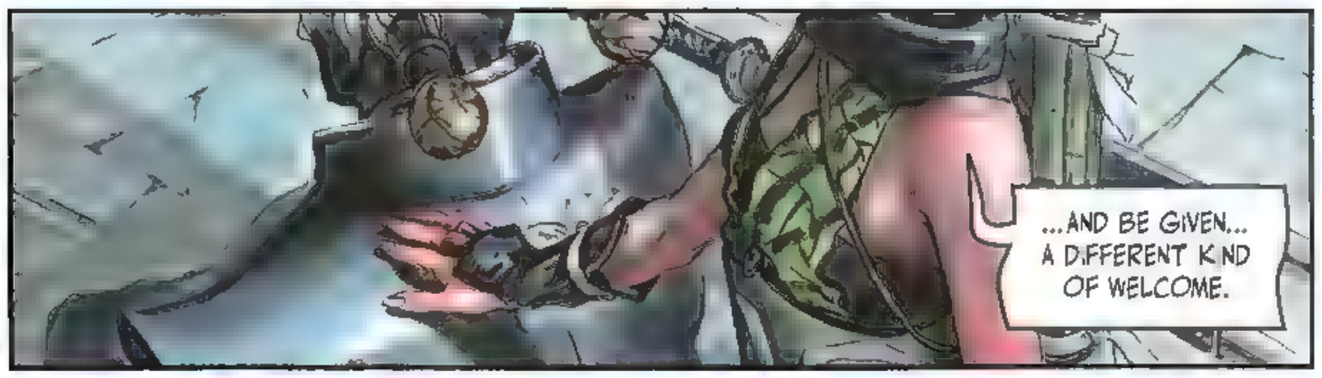

KANPAI!

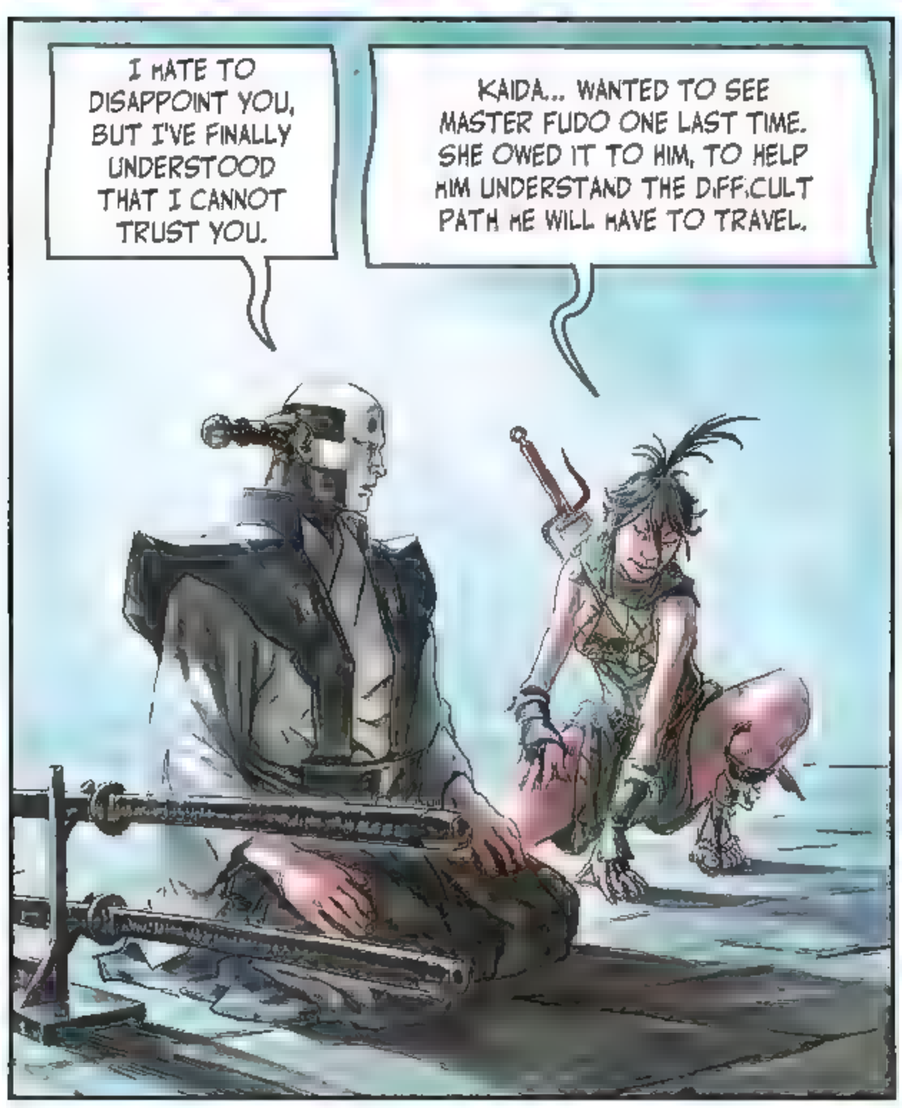

NINE MONTHS HAVE PASSED SINCE KAIDA VANISHED, AND FUDO HAS KEPT THE SECRET THE WHOLE TIME.
MIKIKO NEVER REGAINED HER MEMORY, OR PERHAPS SHE FEIGNED NOT TO, SO AS TO FIND PEACE FOR HERSELF, FOR SHINNOSUKE, AND FOR THE CHILD SHE WOULD BRING INTO THIS WORLD.

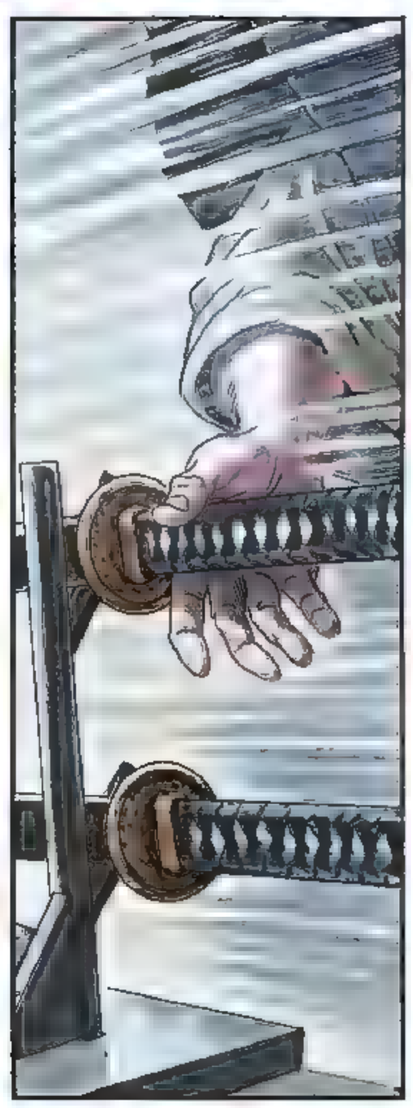
PERHAPS TODAY, FUDO WILL ACCEPT THAT SOME QUESTIONS SIMPLY FALL INTO THE VOID. THE VOID THAT KAIDA HAS LEFT IN HIS HEART.

HE CERTAINLY WASN'T EXPECTING ANY ANSWERS SO SOON.

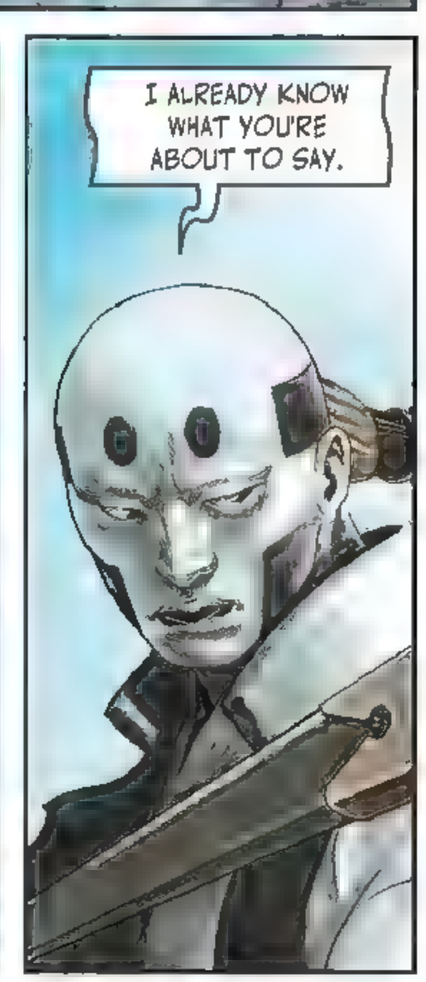

WHY HAVE YOU COME BACK...AFTER ALL THIS TIME?
I SEE MASTER FUDO'S SENSES ARE AS FINELY TUNED AS EVER, DESPITE THE LUXURIES OF LIFE AT COURT.
SHAME. KAIDA WAS HOPING TO SURPRISE HIM...


...AND BE GIVEN... A DIFFERENT KIND OF WELCOME.


I HATE TO DISAPPOINT YOU, BUT I'VE FINALLY UNDERSTOOD THAT I CANNOT TRUST YOU.
KAIDA... WANTED TO SEE MASTER FUDO ONE LAST TIME. SHE OWED IT TO HIM, TO HELP HIM UNDERSTAND THE DIFFICULT PATH HE WILL HAVE TO TRAVEL.

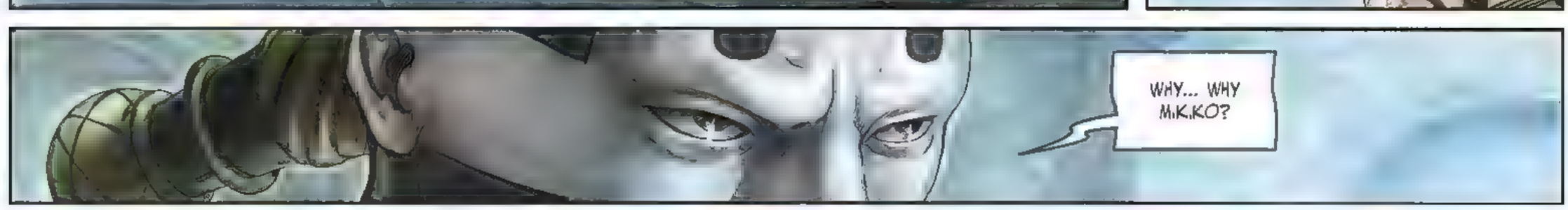


AFTER ALL THIS TIME, YOU APPEAR BEFORE ME TO DRIVE ME MAD AGAIN? I WON'T FOLLOW ANY PATH IF YOU'RE THE ONE WHO REVEALS IT TO ME!
AH, BUT MASTER FUDO ALREADY TRAVELS DOWN THAT PATH. KAIDA WISHED ONLY TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN TORMENTING SHINNOSUKE FOR SO LONG.

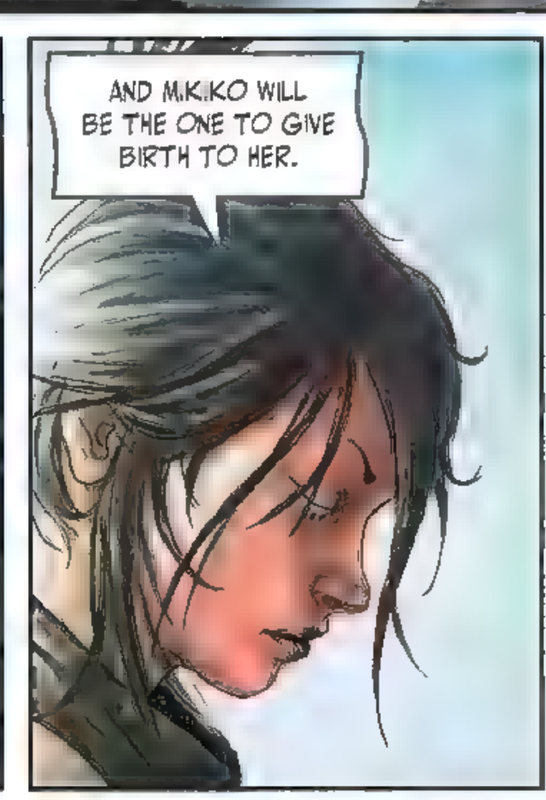

I ALREADY KNOW WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO SAY.

THE BODY I MOURNED IN THE FIRE AT THE TORIYAMA HOUSE WAS AKEMI'S. YOU SWITCHED IT WITH MIKIKO'S BODY BEFORE I GOT THERE.
AFTER THE MASSACRE, KAIZEN WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD HAVE IDENTIFIED HER, AND YOU CONSPIRED TO GET HIM KILLED, USING MY THIRST FOR REVENGE.

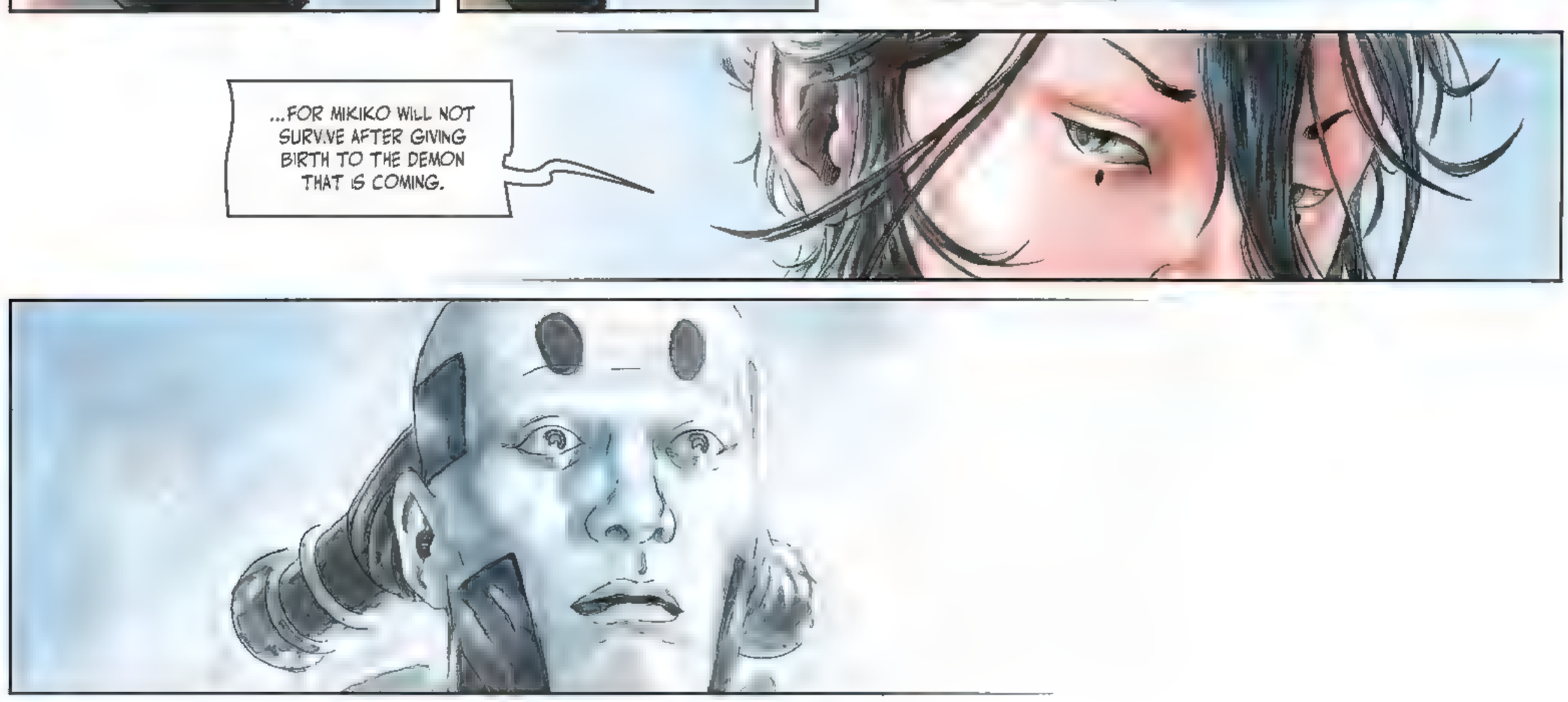
THOSE ANSWERS ARE OBVIOUS. MASTER FUDO CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT...BY ASKING THE ONE MADDENING QUESTION TO WHICH HE HAS NEVER FOUND AN ANSWER...

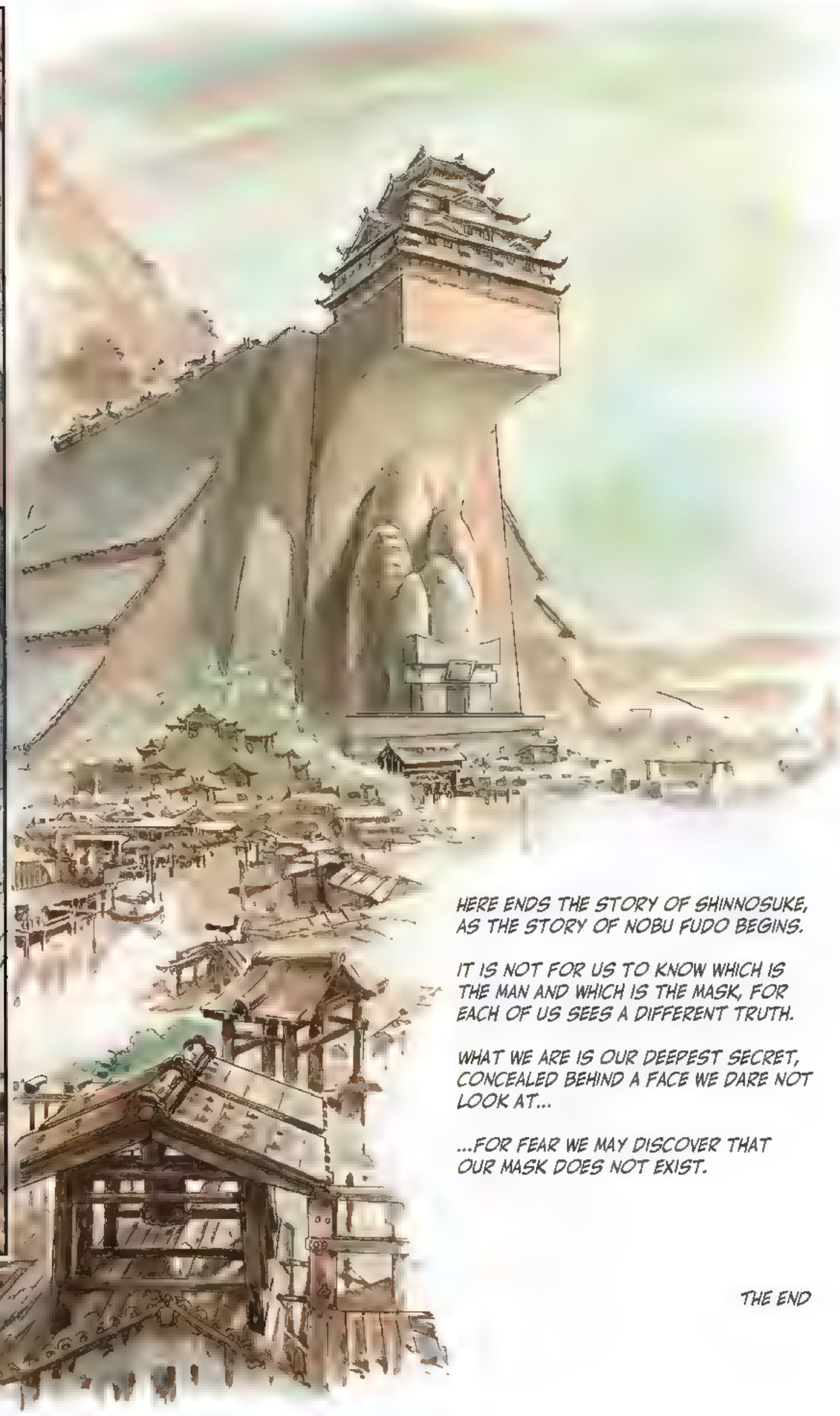

WHY... WHY MIKIKO?

AH, HERE WE GO. KAIDA... OBEYED THE PROPHECY SO THAT THE LIBERATOR MAY COME.


AND MIKIKO WILL BE THE ONE TO GIVE BIRTH TO HER.

W... WHAT? HAD YOU TOLD ME THAT, PERHAPS I COULD HAVE--
OH, NO... SHINNOSUKE NEVER WOULD HAVE ACCEPTED...


...FOR MIKIKO WILL NOT SURVIVE AFTER GIVING BIRTH TO THE DEMON THAT IS COMING.



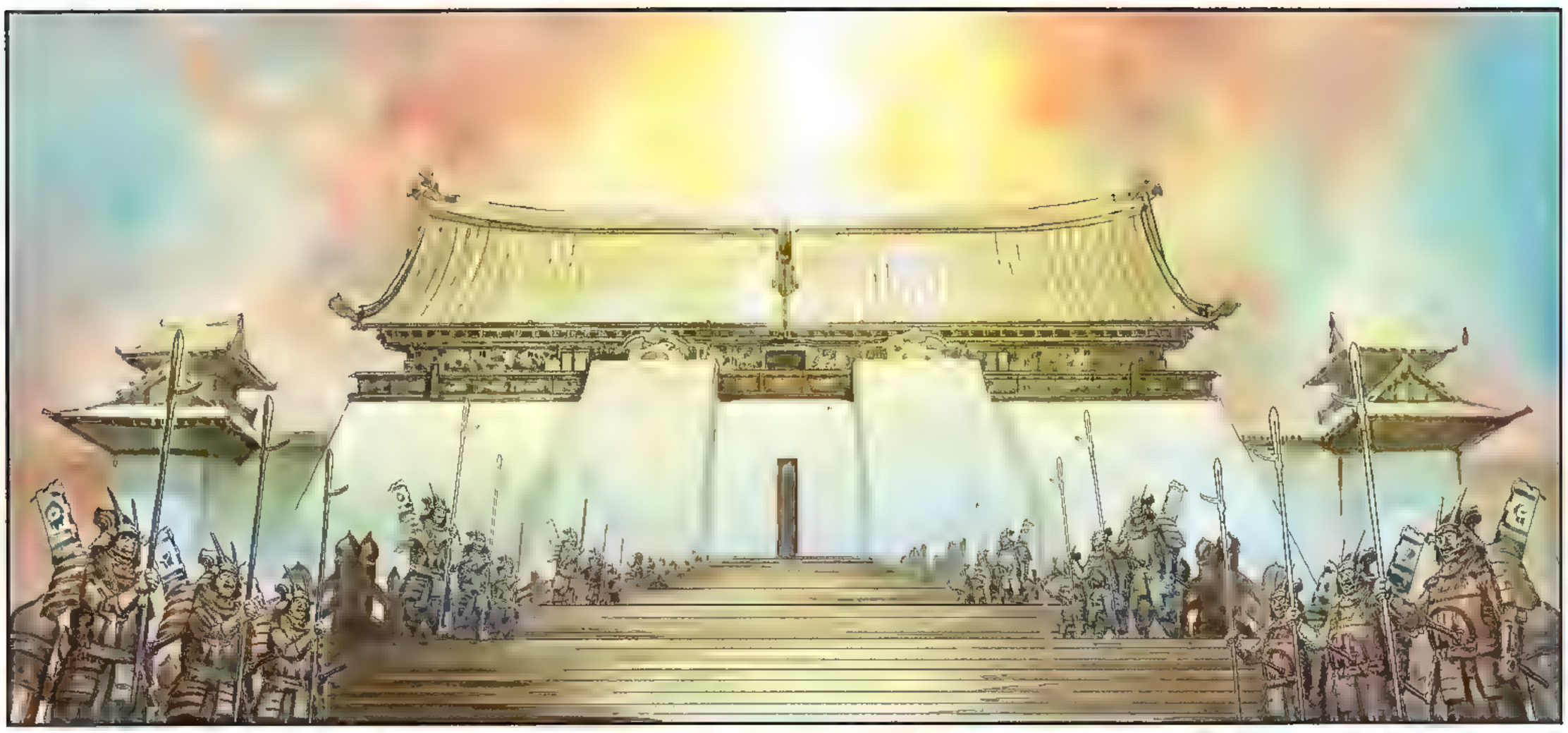
HERE ENDS THE STORY OF SHINNOSUKE, AS THE STORY OF NOBU FUDO BEGINS.

IT IS NOT FOR US TO KNOW WHICH IS THE MAN AND WHICH IS THE MASK, FOR EACH OF US SEES A DIFFERENT TRUTH.

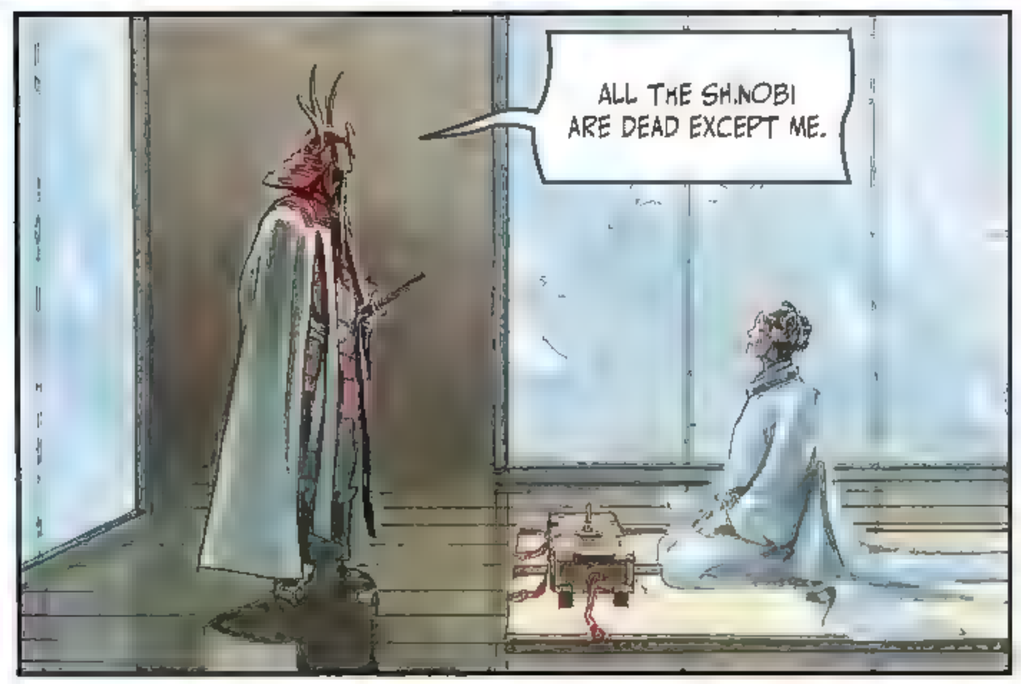
WHAT WE ARE IS OUR DEEPEST SECRET, CONCEALED BEHIND A FACE WE DARE NOT LOOK AT...

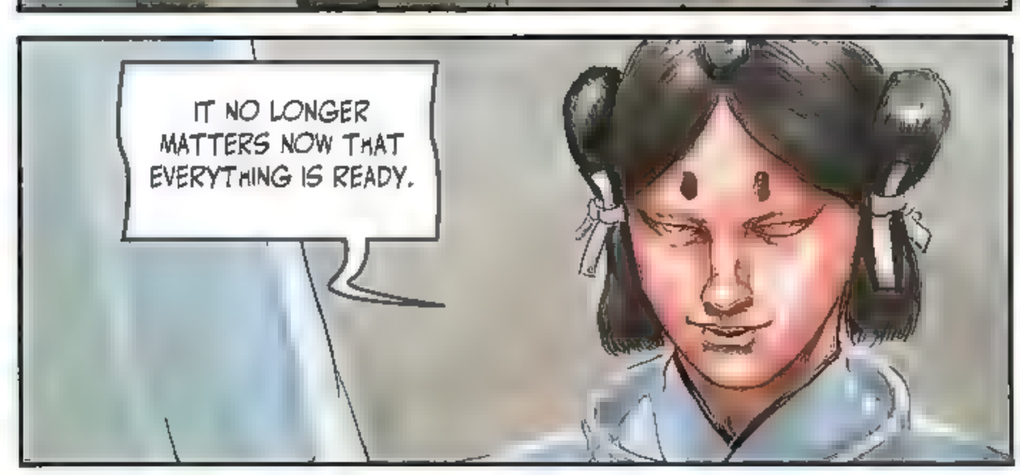
...FOR FEAR WE MAY DISCOVER THAT OUR MASK DOES NOT EXIST.

THE END

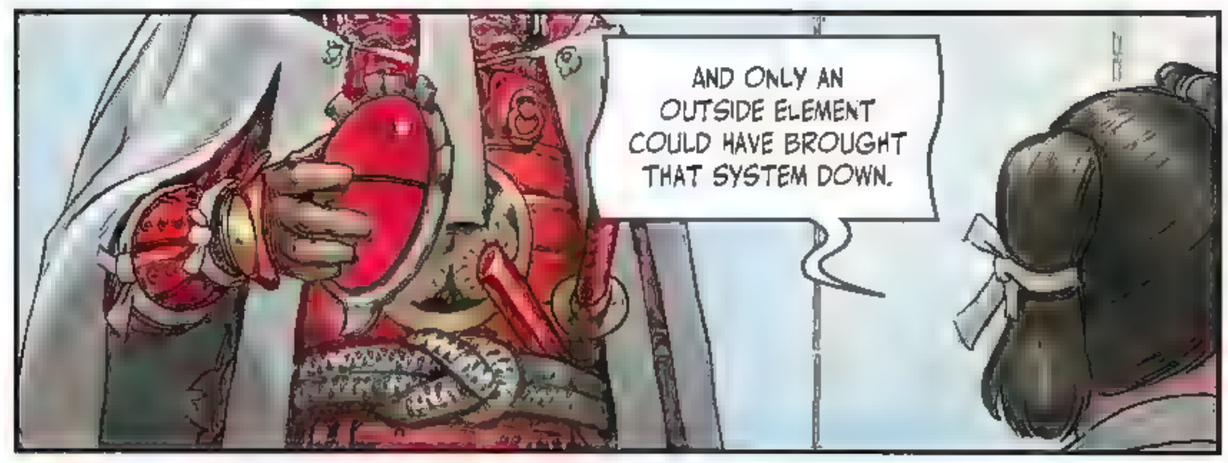


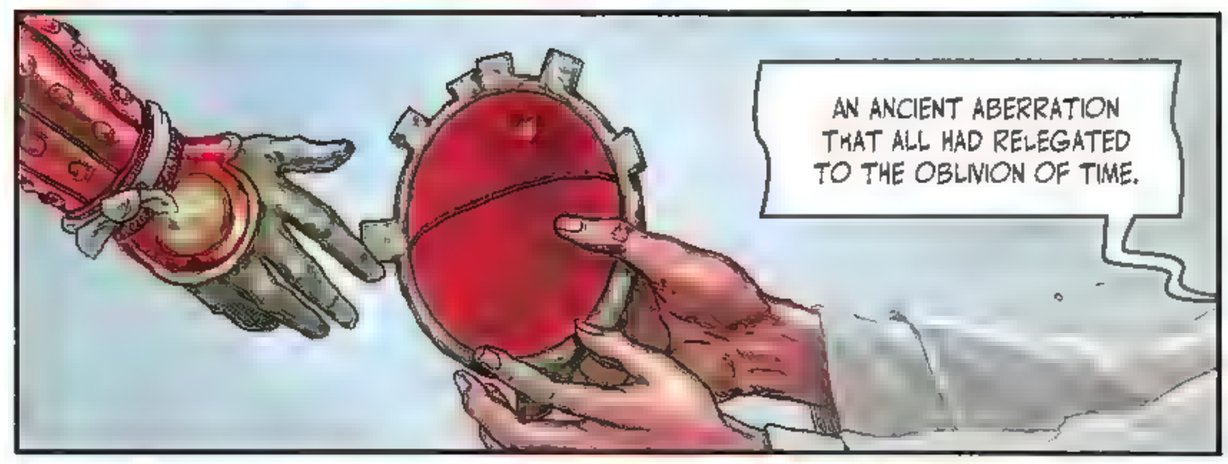
OH, IT'S YOU. VERY CLEVER TO DRESS UP AS A PRISON GUARD.

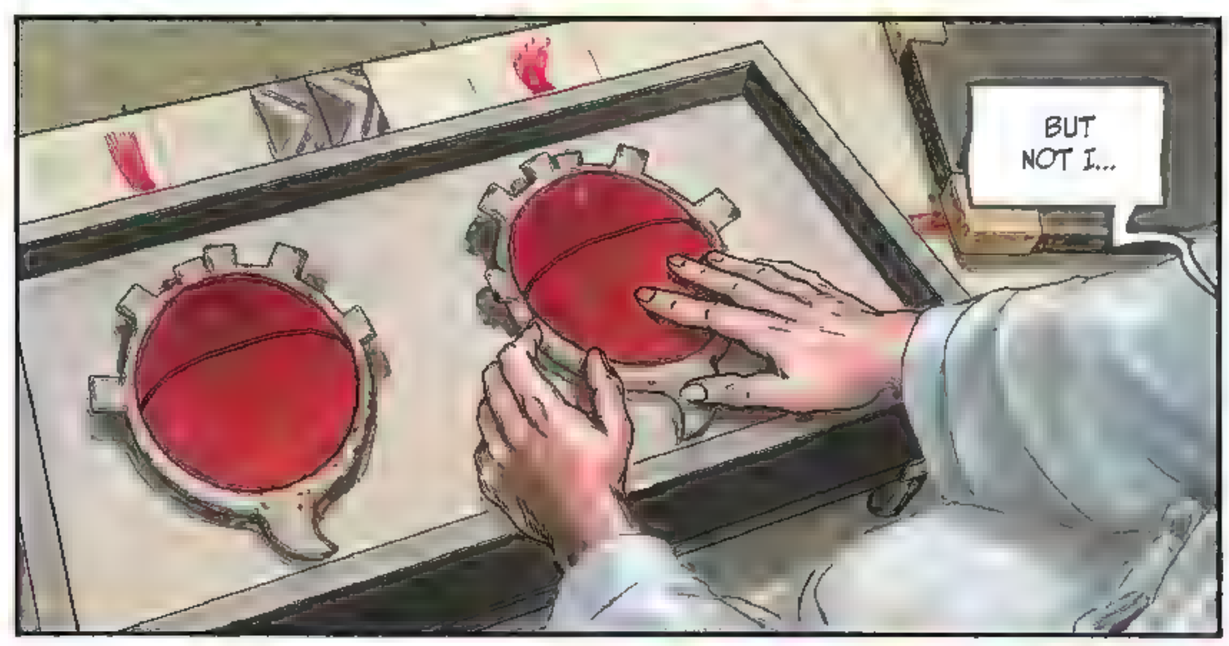

ALL THE SHINOBI ARE DEAD EXCEPT ME.

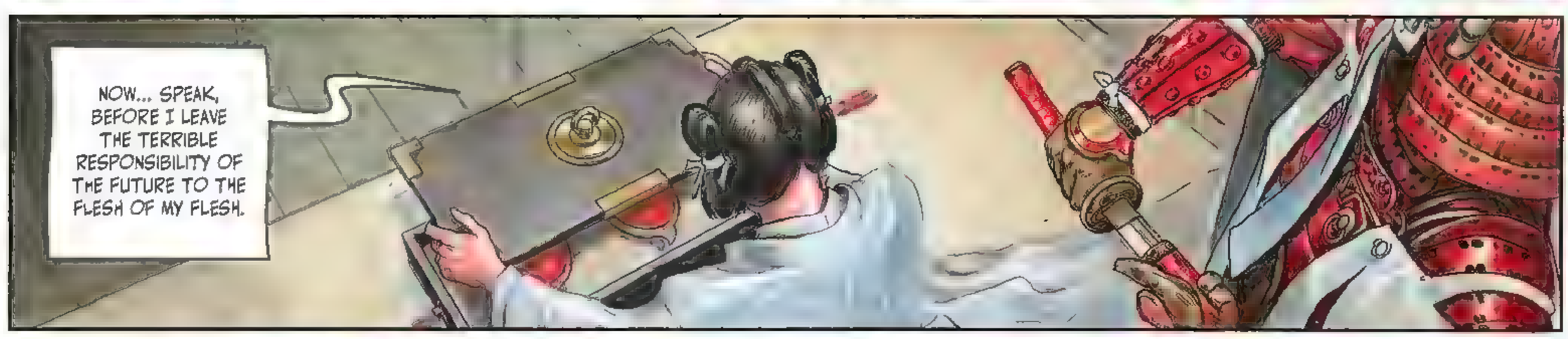

IT NO LONGER MATTERS NOW THAT EVERYTHING IS READY.

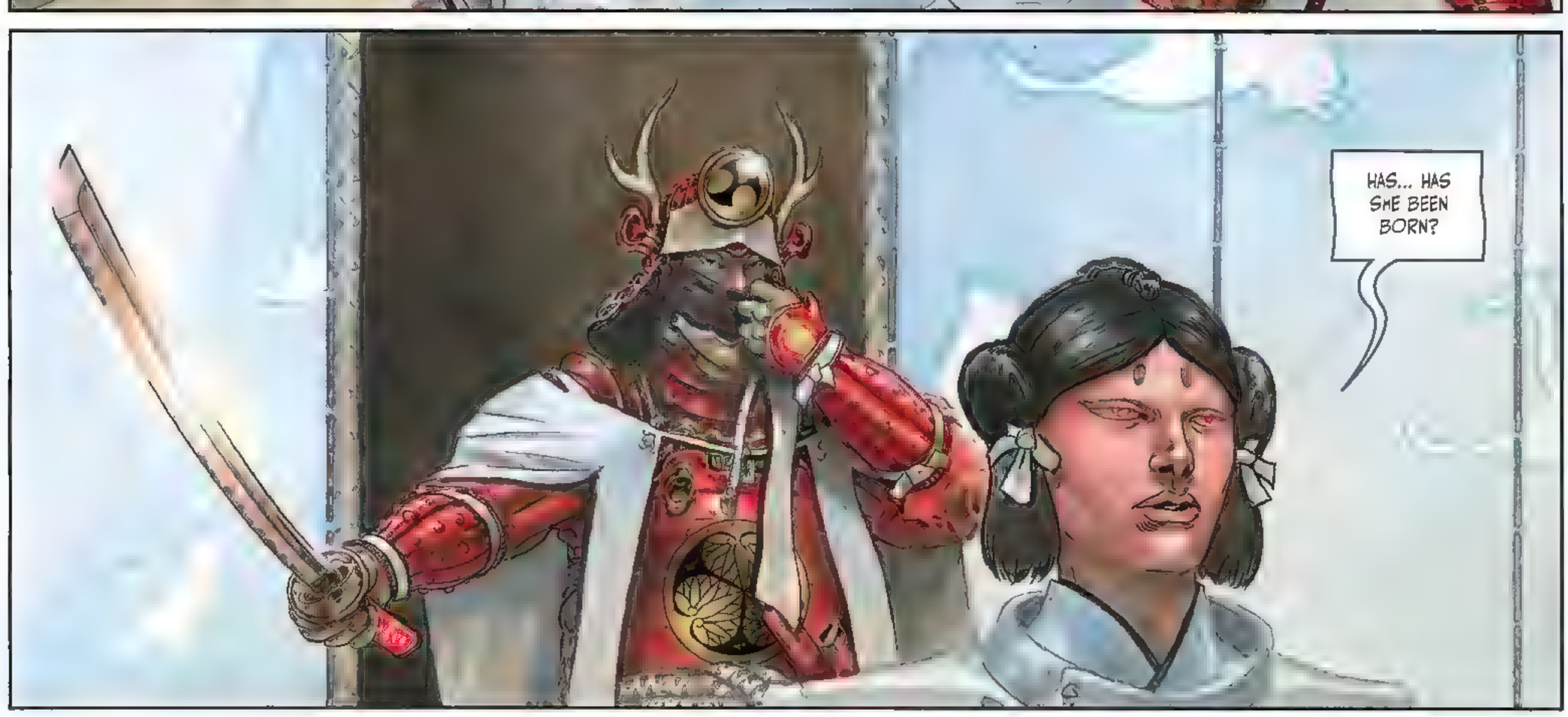
GIVING SUCH TREMENDOUS POWER TO A MORTAL WAS A MISTAKE.
MY POWERS ALONE WERE NO LONGER SUFFICIENT TO OVERTHROW THE ILLEGAL REIGN BUILT BY GENERATIONS OF SHOGUNS.


AND ONLY AN OUTSIDE ELEMENT COULD HAVE BROUGHT THAT SYSTEM DOWN.


AN ANCIENT ABERRATION THAT ALL HAD RELEGATED TO THE OBLIVION OF TIME.

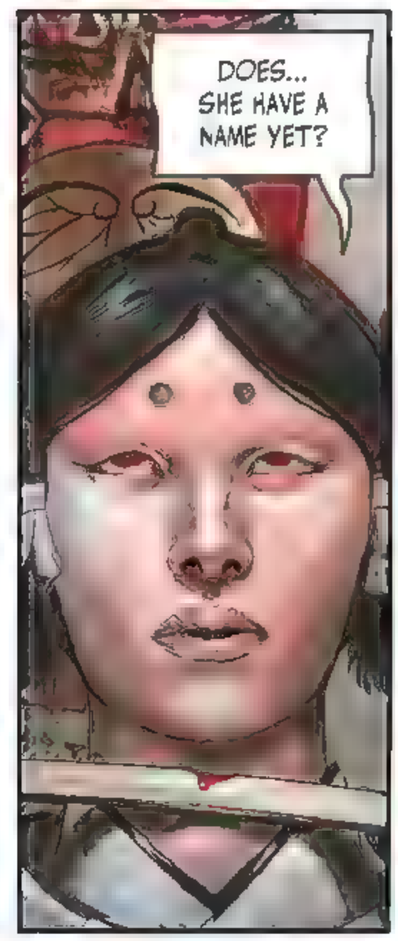

BUT NOT I...

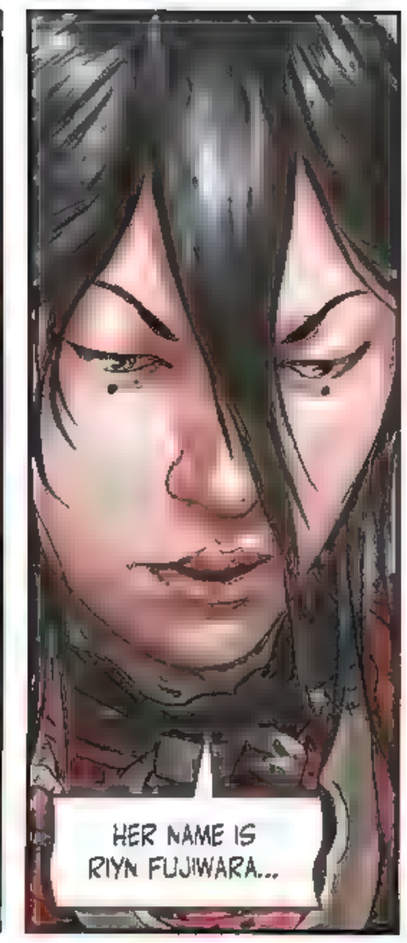

NOW... SPEAK, BEFORE I LEAVE THE TERRIBLE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE FUTURE TO THE FLESH OF MY FLESH.


HAS... HAS SHE BEEN BORN?

YES, FATHER. THE SHOGUN HAS AN HEIRESS AT LAST, AS DO YOU, WITH KAIDA.

THE LIBERATOR WILL BRING DOWN THE SACRILEGIOUS BAKUFU BY CORRUPTING IT FROM THE INSIDE, AND THE ANCIENT REIGN WILL BE REESTABLISHED.


DOES... SHE HAVE A NAME YET?


HER NAME IS RIYN FUJIWARA...

"...AND SHE IS DESTINED TO SCARLET BLADES."
"CLOUDS OF BLOOD, CLOUDS OF BLOOD, THE FATAL PROPHECY HAS ARRIVED."

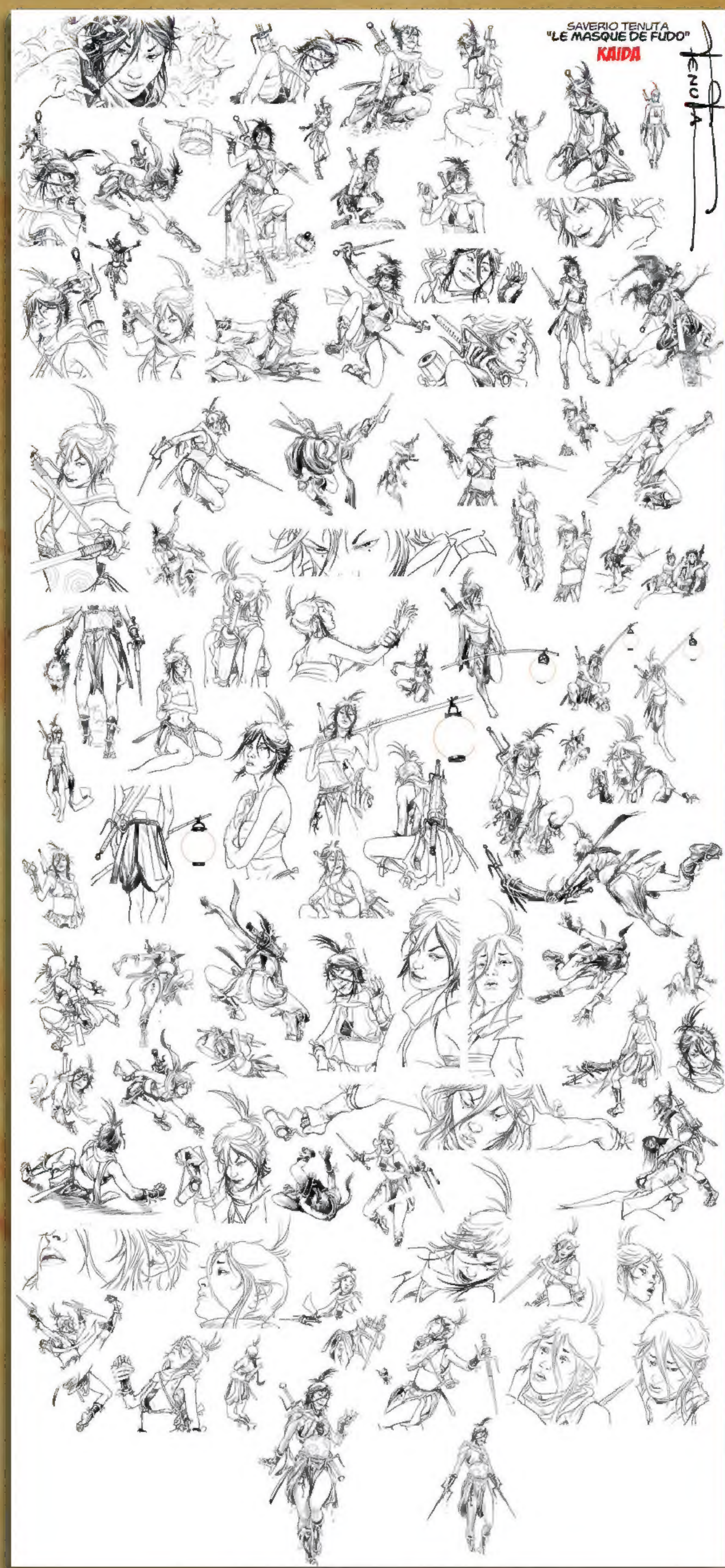
FUDO UNMASKED

BY SAWERIO TENUTA

Illustration of Shinnosuke, made with India ink.

Character research: Tenaga

Character research: Kurobozu



Character research: Kaida

Illustration for a comic book festival poster,
made by Carita Lupattelli using India ink, watercolor, and acrylic.